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AN ETHICS WORTHY OF THE NAME

of god and ghosts in derridean ethics

For Jacques Derrida, the question of ethics is indissociable from that of God. To be sure, Derrida cultivated a certain undecidability with regards to his own religious beliefs, if he had any. His understanding of ethics has, therefore, little to do with an embracing of the moral order of God. Rather, it stems from Emmanuel Levinas's observation that the metaphysical tradition that has dominated Western thinking up to the late twentieth century has proven "[i]ncapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other" (Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" 91). In line with Levinas, Derrida sets himself up against this tradition, hoping to displace Western thinking's focus away from the identical, the absolute, and the universal towards the particularity of the particular. According to Simon Critchley, it follows that "Derridean deconstruction can, and should, be understood as an ethical demand, provided that ethics is understood in the particular sense given to it in the work of Emmanuel Levinas" (127), that is to say, as "the location of a point of alterity […] that cannot be reduced to the Same" (128). It is here that Derrida's ethical project can be said to come into confrontational contact with God. As Barry Stocker has remarked, it has long been established – notably through Heidegger's critique of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics – that "[w]here the question of the absolute arises, where metaphysics becomes possible, God inevitably arises as a name for a space in our world" (119). Derrida therefore has a bone to pick with God, or with whatever the word "God" *names*.

This paper clarifies the terms and stakes of this confrontation by shedding light on the relation of mutual exclusion and implication that binds Derridean ethics with (the name of) God. In rupture with the prevailing tendency of existing scholarship to categorize Derridean ethics as *either* radically atheistic – and threatening organized religion – *or* dialectically pertaining to the Judeo-Christian moral order, which it would revitalize in the modern disenchanted world, I put forward the argument that Derrida's ethical thinking is best considered outside of

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the dialectics of a/theism. Through a careful re-examination of the ties that bind Derridean ethics with the figure of God, I demonstrate that, far from plainly disproving or falling within the bounds of existing religious discourses, Derrida inaugurates a new way of relating to the absolute – whether it be named God, the infinitely other, or justice – beyond nihilism *and* idealism, atheism *and* theism, or more precisely "between the two, and between all the 'two's' one likes, such as between life and death" (*Specters of Marx* xvii), that is to say, in "the virtual space of spectrality" (12). I thereby hope to finally do justice to the subtlety of Derridean ethics and foster the recognition that, twenty years after Derrida's death, his ghosts can be of use in tackling some of the greatest ethical and political challenges of the twenty-first century, including the pursuit of peaceful pluralism in the context of rampant violence carried out in the name of God.

theological complicity

Georgette Sultana Esther Derrida raised her children in "that environment of the Jewish people of Algeria" (Derrida, *Monolingualism* 41).[1] Yet as her third son Jackie grew up to become one of the most renowned thinkers of late-twentieth-century France under the more "proper" name Jacques, she started to doubt his faith in God.[2] Jacques Derrida's critical engagement with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, another prominent French thinker of Jewish ancestry and education, seemed particularly damning in this regard. Although Derrida once suggested that, "[c]onfronted with a thought like Levinas's, I never have any objection" ("Discussion" 64), he nevertheless expressed strong reservations about the implication of God in Levinas's pursuit of non-recuperable alterity.

To be sure, insofar as he proposes to displace ethics from the universal to the particular, from a set of moral laws to an otherness whose mode of being cannot be reduced to being-as-such, Levinas challenges God's traditional role as mediator in human relationships. This is exemplified by Levinas's reading of the biblical story of Isaac's aborted sacrifice. In *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard had suggested that this crucial passage from Genesis signals that God alone gives relationships their ethical value. Abraham's intention to kill his son would be horrifying were it not a response to a divine command. Crucially, by sending an angel to stop Abraham's arm, God teaches humanity how to behave ethically towards one another. In *Proper Names*, Levinas opposes Kierkegaard's reading by drawing attention to Abraham's sensitivity to the angel's call. Given what Abraham endured to prepare for the sacrifice – he lied to Sarah, went into the mountains, prepared the altar, and surely resigned himself to obey God – Levinas is surprised by Abraham's readiness to respond to the angel (*Proper Names* 77). It is as if Abraham had heard the call before it was even uttered. Besides, Levinas also remarks that the call does not come from God Himself, but from a messenger. The relation between Abraham and his son is not mediated by God, as Kierkegaard had it: Abraham is face to face with Isaac. For Levinas, it is this encounter that brings Abraham back to the ethical, not the angel's command. The ethical lies in the face to face with the other and therefore requires the effacement of God – that of Abraham and, by extension, that of the philosophers (namely, the universal) – in the face of the particular.

In his 1964 "Violence and Metaphysics," however, Derrida notes that this effacement of God is not complete for, in an attempt to think a non-violent encounter with the other, one in which the other would not risk being reduced to (or recuperated by) the Same, Levinas is led to *absolutize* the other. For Levinas, Derrida observes, "the other is the other only if his alterity is absolutely irreducible, that is, infinitely irreducible; and the infinitely Other can only be Infinity" ("Violence and Metaphysics" 104). The ethical relation thus becomes an encounter with the infinitely Other *as God*. As Levinas stresses, "through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God [...] Ethics is not the corollary of the

vision of God, it is that very vision" (*Difficult Freedom* 17). Derrida takes issue with this depiction of the infinitely other as positive plenitude. Levinas's "*dream* of [...] [a] *pure* thought of *pure* difference" leads him to dialectically replace the moral order of God with an ethical absolutism of the infinitely Other ("Violence and Metaphysics" 151).[3] For Derrida, this creates asymmetry between the self and the other in the ethical relationship, and therefore threatens to reintroduce oppression in a thought otherwise liberated from the domination of the Same.

To be sure, Derrida acknowledges that

> God alone keeps Levinas's world from being a world of the pure and worst violence, a world of immorality itself. The structures of living and naked experience described by Levinas are the very structures of a world in which war would rage – strange conditional – if the infinitely other were not infinity. ("Violence and Metaphysics" 107)

Should there be no God to encounter through the other, should the other be just a man, nothing would prevent him from being violently reduced to (or recuperated by) the Same. Yet Derrida also remarks that war is implied by the existence of the infinitely Other as God insofar as "a relation with the absolute other [...] propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice" (*Gift of Death* 68). The ethical relation, as Levinas sees it, is not one between equals – *equally other others* – but one in which there exists a hierarchically superior Other to which I must sacrifice everything. In Levinas's thinking, the infinitely Other therefore appears to *both* prevent *and* generate situations of oppression. For Derrida, this signals that Levinas fails to liberate thought from the identical, the absolute, and the universal to think non-recuperable alterity. Insofar as he replaces the tyranny of the Same with that of another positive plenitude, namely, the infinitely Other as God, "Levinas is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse" (Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" 151). Despite all his precautions, Levinas falls prey to "the equivocal complicity of theology and metaphysics" (108–09).

atheistic dissemination

Derrida's own ethical thinking arises in reaction to the dialectical implication of God in Levinas's ethics. In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida argues that if – as Levinas shows despite himself – "[a]s soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude [...], the other becomes unthinkable" (114), then "a relation to the infinite(ly) other is not theological" (108). Thinking non-recuperable alterity requires steering clear from the idea of plenitude that is traditionally referred to under the name of God by "maintain[ing] [...] the negativity of the indefinite" (114). "Does not 'the infinitely other' primarily signify that which does not come to an end, despite my interminable labor and experience?," Derrida asks (114).

In contrast with Levinas, Derrida locates infinite otherness in the non-generalizable and interminable alterity of *each* other, that is to say, in the fact that "[e]very other (in the sense of each other) is every bit other (absolutely other)" (*Gift of Death* 78). Difference, for Derrida, is *disseminated*. It therefore seems inappropriate to keep speaking of it in the singular. Derrida skirts this issue by coining the neologism *différance*. Through a deliberate misspelling of the French *différence*, he draws attention to the fact that the otherness in question resists recuperation within a thinking of difference-as-such through incessant differing and deferral. By contrast with Levinas's infinitely Other/God, Derridean alterity unfolds as an infinite series of finite examples of otherness. *Différance* is infinitely finite.[4]

"Is that the end of theology, then?," Steven Shakespeare asks in *Derrida and Theology*, voicing a concern shared by many in Faculties of Theology around the world (45). At first sight, Derrida's thinking does not seem to leave any space for a positive plenitude worthy of the name God, thus threatening theological modes of thinking. Could one blame Martin Hägglund for suggesting that Derrida rethinks the

condition of ethics "in accordance with the logic of radical atheism" (10), then? Or Christopher Norris and Gayatri Spivak for "disseminating deconstruction's assumed power to demystify religion and to convict theology of the metaphysics of presence" (Sherwood and Hart 11)?

Beyond theological considerations, Derrida's thinking of *différance* was met with significant ethical reservations. Insofar as it approaches difference as infinitely finite, critics argue, Derrida's ethics not only appears to be *without God* but also risks being *without justice* – and, by extension, altogether nihilistic. Derrida himself acknowledges that his thinking of *différance* admits no fixed idea of justice. If *every other is wholly other*, what counts as a just decision varies from one context to the next. Derridean ethics cannot, therefore, be programmatic: "No politics, no ethics, and no law can be, as it were, *deduced* from this thought" (Derrida, *Rogues* xv). In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida goes so far as to argue that, out of respect for the particularity of the particular, some distance *must* be kept with pre-existing laws, norms, and values that seek to facilitate decision-making: "[I]f decision-making is relegated to a knowledge that it is content to follow or to develop," he stresses, "then it is no more a responsible decision, it is the technical deployment of a theorem" (24). Like Kierkegaard and Levinas before him, Derrida sets the biblical story of Isaac's sacrifice as an example. Abraham's sacrificial intention, Derrida remarks, is as much directed towards his son as towards *the known*; it testifies to Abraham's willingness to expose himself to what exceeds existing laws and norms – in this case, the command not to murder. Derrida describes this experience as "the very ordeal of the undecidable" (5). That does not mean that Abraham is left paralyzed with indecision, but rather that his decision to sacrifice Isaac is one that is not decided in advance. It is an experience of emancipation and innovation.

Although one may be willing to agree with Derrida's critique of unreflective decision-making, critics such as John Searle, Amy Gutmann, and Allan Bloom (among many others) have expressed serious doubts as to whether emancipation from existing legal and/or moral frameworks facilitates ethical behavior. That a decision is innovative does not imply that it is *just*, critics stress, suspecting that Derridean ethics boils down to relativism. Derrida himself clarifies that, for him, Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac is in no way exemplary of justice or absolute responsibility. That Abraham proves willing to sacrifice the known fulfils his responsibility to the particular; yet he thereby *sacrifices* the ethical command not to murder. For Derrida, "Abraham *remains* a criminal: on the level of ethics it's a crime to obey God's order" ("Epoché and Faith"); "Abraham is thus at the same time the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible of men" (*Gift of Death* 72).

Derrida finds this paradox in *every* relationship. In contradistinction with Levinas's ethics, which admits a hierarchically superior Other to which I must sacrifice everything, Derrida's thinking of *différance* implies that, as soon as I enter into a relation with an other, "[t]here are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others, to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility" (*Gift of Death* 68). Like Abraham, one is faced with incompatible ethical demands: "I can respond [to the other] 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" (68). Does not this undermine the human struggle for peace and the *raison d'être* of ethics?, critics ask. For Derrida, justice can never be achieved; violence always remains. No wonder his ethical thinking drew the accusation that it "doesn't in itself permit any just action, any just discourse on justice but instead constitutes a threat to *droit*, to law or right, and ruins the condition of the very possibility of justice" (Derrida, "Force of Law" 4).

the (holy) ghost

Thirty years after the infamous 1992 Cambridge Affair, which saw scholars engage in a

violent denunciation of the supposed nihilistic dangers of Derrida's thinking, distrust of deconstruction still prevails in many Theology and Philosophy Faculties around the world. In January 2022, an international conference held at the Sorbonne even sought to establish Derrida's responsibility in the emergence of *cancel culture*, defined on this occasion as a contemporary temptation "to wipe out […] the entire legacy of Western civilization,"[5] and more specifically, to bury the intellectual achievements and ideals of the Enlightenment. "Vigilance," Derrida however warns in *Specters of Marx*: "the cadaver [understand, the cadaver of these ideals that Derrida would bury] is perhaps not as dead, as simply dead as the conjuration [of Cambridge dons and *Sorbonnards*] tries to delude us into believing" (120). Blinded by the fear that deconstruction might "infec[t] our most cherished realities, our ethics and, yes, our religion with nihilistic fantasy" (Shakespeare 1), critics fail to recognize that Derrida's ethics remains *haunted* by positive plenitude, a "logic of haunting" (*Specters of Marx* 10) which, I argue, should dispel any suspicion of atheism or nihilism.

It has already been established that Derrida coins the neologism *différance* to designate an otherness that cannot close in on itself. *Différance* "is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, [*it*] *is never present as such*" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* xvii). By virtue of having a name, however, *différance* may still be said to have "a kind of body, but without property, without 'real' or 'personal' right of property" (51). Although the ambiguous spelling of the term draws attention to the *spectral* quality of this body, the very act of naming *différance* also renders manifest Derrida's desire to refer to the infinitely other as a singular reality and a determined identity. It signals, in other words, that Derrida's thinking remains *haunted* by a desire for positive plenitude. This desire, to be sure, "carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 143). Infinite otherness is announced in/as every other, thus acquiring a semblance of unity. Unity is, therefore, only *extrapolated from* the repetition of the different. Hence Derrida's suggestion that *différance* is neither a concept nor a doctrine, nothing determined at all: its identity is an illusion that arises from the eternal return of the different.[6] I believe that Derrida thus inaugurates the "Copernican revolution" discussed by Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* (40–41): identity remains in Derrida's thinking, yet it revolves around the different rather than the other way round.[7]

Rodolphe Gasché is right, then: "Derrida makes room for God, so to speak" (*Inventions of Difference* 161), yet only insofar as God is "an *effect of the trace*" (Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" 108). Much as a linguistic sign acquires meaning from the traces of all the signs from which it differs, an idea of identity – and, by extension, of positive plenitude worthy of the name God – arises in Derrida's thinking from "a structurally infinite network of referrals that comes to only an illusion of a halt when it represents itself, reveals itself, in exemplary fashion" (Gasché, *Inventions of Difference* 162). The unfolding of the infinite series of finite examples of otherness announces the (impossible) coming of the infinitely Other as God. This God is not the *alpha* and *omega* of the world; rather, "the play of the world precedes God" (Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" 107). Derrida notes that "[t]his is what Levinas, here in agreement with all the most classical infinist metaphysics, would judge to be impossible, absurd, or purely verbal" (143n78), and that this proposition is "readily converted into atheism" (108). Yet it should now be clear that Derridean ethics is *not* strictly atheistic: it excludes *and implies* God. If, for Derrida, "God is *nothing* (determined)" (115), He "appears still to be *there*, and his apparition is not nothing" (*Specters of Marx* 120). He is a (Holy) ghost haunting Derridean ethics, a messianic dream that will never be fulfilled.

In "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida highlights that "[*a*]*n invincible desire for justice is linked to this expectation*" (56). Thinking the (impossible) coming of the infinitely other as God is thinking the (impossible) possibility of an ethical relation in which the particularity

of the particular would be absolutely respected. It is thinking "*the coming of the other as the advent of justice*" (56). This disproves accusations of nihilism addressed to Derrida. His thinking does carry something absolute, an ideal for which to strive – justice worthy of the name, something that one may wish to call God – though it remains to come, impossible. As Derrida stressed in a discussion with Jean-Luc Marion: "We continue to desire, to dream, *through* the impossible. The impossible for me is not a negative concept" ("On the Gift" 72).

an interminable to-come

This clarification, however, failed to convince critics. In *Difficult Atheism*, Christopher Watkin argues that insofar as Derrida redirects our gaze towards the horizon without horizon of an impossible to-come, his ethics remains "vulnerable to the accusation that justice can no longer determine ethical and/or political decisions" (8). This seems to be confirmed by Derrida's remark that "there is never a moment that we can say *in the present* that a decision *is* just" ("Force of Law" 23). According to Derrida, a decision can only be deemed "in conformity with a state of law, with the rules and conventions that authorize calculation but whose founding origin only defers the problem of justice" (23). He was therefore suspected of fostering an attitude of quiet contemplation before ideal justice to come to the detriment of the practical necessities of decision-making. Alain Badiou barely contains his exasperation in the face of Derrida's (perceived) quietism:

> How irritating is this post-Heideggerian style of the perpetual announcement, of the interminable to-come; this sort of secularized prophetism […], this God who is lacking, this posture of gazing far into the mist and saying that we see the indistinct approaching! How we long to say: "Listen, if this thinking is still entirely to come, come back to us when at least a piece of it has arrived!" (15–16; my trans.)

Jürgen Habermas, too, contends that Derrida "degrades politics and contemporary history to the status of the ontic and the foreground" (181), the incessantly delayed promise of justice delaying in turn responsible decision-making. For Habermas, this "has something to do with the fact that Derrida, all denials notwithstanding, remains close to Jewish mysticism" (182): Derrida's dream of an impossible justice to come would "rene[w] the mystical concept of […] an ever *delayed* event of revelation" (183), testifying to his attachment to the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Habermas notes, like the *aleph* with which the Hebrew Bible begins, a consonant which for Gershom Scholem is "nothing more than the position taken by the larynx when a word begins with a vowel […] [,] the source of all articulate sound" (30), the "a" of *différance* carries infinite meaning without however offering any specific, determinate meaning: "[I]n the indeterminacy of this fragile and ambiguous sign is concentrated the entire wealth of the promise" (Habermas 183), the promise – Habermas argues – of a revelation to come.

In "Pour une philosophie non théologique" ["For a Non-Theological Philosophy"], Mikel Dufrenne similarly remarks that Derrida fosters "an experience of absence […] directed towards a presence that would bring it both confirmation and denial" (28; my trans.). Though impossible, presence would dialectically remain in his thinking of *différance*; not in the form of the divine plenitude of positive theology, but as "the negative of a God" (20; my trans.), in line with the most classical discourses of negative (or apophatic) theology. Susan Handelman goes so far as to describe Derrida as "the new high priest of the religion of absence" (172). This aroused the curiosity of theologians such as Thomas Altizer, Don Cupitt, Carl Raschke, and Mark C. Taylor. In secular modernity dominated by the experience of God's disappearance, they identified Derrida's re-activation of the Christian *via negativa* as a useful resource to revitalize religion. Derrida would have found a way of saving the Judeo-Christian God from disenchantment by describing it as a (Holy) ghost, a promise of plenitude that remains on the horizon without horizon of modernity.[8]

Derrida himself acknowledges that his thinking borrows essential features from Judeo-Christian mysticism and apophaticism, "occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology" ("Différance" 6). In "*Sauf le nom*," however, he clarifies that what he shares with these traditions is *not* a tendency to contemplation before a revelation that remains inaccessible, but a capacity to foster criticism. Insofar as mysticism and apophaticism are "anxious to render [themselves] independent of revelation" (71), Derrida stresses, they are regularly suspected of atheism by the religious authorities. By renouncing positive qualifications of the divine, they stretch "the limit of all authority, all narrative, all dogma, all belief" (71). By suggesting that something worthy of the name God remains to come, Derrida similarly fosters critical suspicion in the face of any authority – whether confessional or not – that claims to *realize* an idea of positive plenitude. His ethics signals that no dogma, narrative, or authority can justify itself and declare itself "pure" by appealing to an absolute that is taken for granted. Derrida thereby counters the dogmatic, authoritarian temptation that continuously looms over religious, ethical, and political judgement. Following Derrida, no war can *legitimately* be waged in the name of God, nor crimes committed in the name of love, not even abortion prohibited in the name of an absolute respect for life. Insofar as the absolute remains to come, "one can always criticize, reject or combat this or that form of sacredness or of belief, even of religious authority, in the name of the most originary possibility" ("Faith and Knowledge" 93).

In line with the accusations of heresy that have condemned apophaticism to "subversive marginality […] in the history of theology" (Derrida, "*Sauf le nom*" 71), however, Habermas suspects that Derrida breaks with "the authoritarian admonition to bend before destiny," that is to say, before the absolute, by "stand[ing] closer to the anarchist wish to explode the continuum of history" (182). Insofar as he argues that no action can legitimately be carried out, nor any authority established, in the name of an ideal, Derrida attracts the accusation of fostering a systematic undermining of existing regimes and institutions *by comparison with an unattainable ideal*. In "The Midwinter Sacrifice," John Milbank thus traces Derrida's perceived renewal of Nietzsche's imperative to philosophize with a hammer back to an *obsession with purity* (121–24). As Tyler Roberts explains, "Milbank reads Derrida's 'impossibility' as meaning that responsibility will never be fully realized, always postponed, always demanding further sacrifice in a futile quest for purity" (272). To be sure, nothing seems out of reach for Derrida's philosophical hammer. In *Rogues* and *Specters of Marx*, for instance, he does not hesitate to criticize the political model of liberal democracy, the universalist rhetoric of human rights, and "the right of interference or intervention in the name of what is obscurely and sometimes hypocritically called the *humanitarian*" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 105). Far from dispelling critics' fears of the destructive potential of Derridean ethics, then, it appears that Derrida's return to the shores of idealism and theology further contributed to his reputation as "a street-corner anarchist […] out to destroy our traditions and institutions" (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 36).

believing in ghosts

This reputation, however, fails to do justice to the subtlety of Derrida's ethical thinking. I argue that critics caricature Derrida's desire for the impossible by describing it as a blind idealism or negative theology that leaves him paralyzed or condemned to foster annihilation in light of the unattainability of the ideal. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida stresses that obsession with purity is on the critics' side, not his, as testified by the fact that they fail to think outside of the binary opposition between presence and absence, being and non-being. "A traditional scholar," he writes, "does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 12). When faced with a ghost, the

critics' gaze is immediately redirected towards *the presence of which the ghost supposedly signifies the loss*. The ghost *of* what, *of* whom? They ask, looking *through* the ghost rather than directly *at* it. When Derrida refers to *différance*, the God to come, or impossible justice, when he manifests his desire for presence by the very use of these names, all that critics see is that purity has now become unattainable. They argue that Derrida's ethics is haunted by positive plenitude, its absence being directed towards presence, like apophaticism is haunted by the divine conceived of as an unrevealable secret that nevertheless stands as "a reserve of potential knowing" ("*Sauf le nom*" 59).

As early as in *Of Grammatology*, however, Derrida stresses that desire for presence is *not* all that the act of naming renders manifest. Insofar as it inscribes the particularity of the particular within a system of coded possibilities to make it recognizable and relatable, the name also compromises the reality which it seeks to pin down: "To think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it here, such is the gesture of [...] [naming]: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 112). Although the act of naming responds to a desire for presence, then, it appears to also refer this desire back to its *illusory character*. It identifies nothing, captures nothing; it keeps no-thing safe, not even the secret, whose non-disclosure is betrayed by its identification as a secret. "The secret denies, or better denegates itself [...]" Shakespeare explains. "It does not remain pure and self-enclosed. As soon as it is formulated as a secret, it has already begun to manifest itself" (Shakespeare 103). Derrida thus speaks of naming as an *auto-immune* gesture in reference to the suicidal behavior of an immune system turning against itself. Although the act of naming starts off as a gesture of "self-protection of the unscathed, [...] [the unscathed] protect[s] itself against its own protection, its own police, its own power of rejection, in short against its own" (Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge" 80).

The naming of God is no exception. In "*Sauf le nom*," Derrida remarks that this gesture paradoxically seeks to identify something that transcends any given existence, the Supreme Being in excess of any finite reality. Although the naming of God is thought of as a reference, a call, or address to a proper referent, then, it also gestures towards a space *beyond determinate reference*, "as if it was necessary to lose the name in order to save what bears the name, or that toward which one goes through the name" (Derrida, "*Sauf le nom*" 58). For Derrida, this means not only that a name – whether this name is God or not – "is not the 'thing' that it names" (84), but also that, "when a name comes, it immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other, whose irruption the name announces" (Derrida, "*Khôra*" 89).

I argue, using Nietzschean vocabulary, that the name thus sheds light on *the genealogy of the absolute* (is it not what names do, tracing genealogies?). It has already been established that the desire for presence that leads Derrida to refer to disseminated alterity as a singular reality under the name *différance* arises from the repetition of the different. For Derrida, the very idea that something might "finally arriv[e] at the plenitude of its ideal" (*Specters of Marx* 70), is extrapolated from the eternal return of finite occurrences of otherness. Insofar as the act of naming implies gesturing beyond the reality that one seeks to name, it may be said to draw attention to this genealogy. It signals that identity worthy of the name, if there is any, *depends on the coming of an other, another other, and yet another without possible end*. The act of naming signals, by extension, that plenitude only appears under the guise of a ghost, as the mirage of an oasis in the desert. If the oasis recedes as one approaches and the ghost vanishes under one's touch, it is *not* because they retreat into the depths of being, keeping presence and identity in reserve, as Derrida's critics think in line with apophatic discourses, but rather because there is, in fact, *no-thing to reach*.

The resemblance between Derrida's ethics and apophaticism ends here, then. Whereas the latter conceive of God as a self-enclosed, unrevealable secret according to an "ontological wager of hyperessentiality" (*Psyche II* 147), Derrida contends that "[t]here is no secret *as such*" (163). When Derrida refers to *différance*, justice to come, or when he uses the name God, he does not draw attention to the loss of a plenitude that would have retreated into the depths of being: this loss, for Derrida, is but "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" (*Of Grammatology* 112). When Derrida refers to *différance*, justice to come, or when he uses the name God, he "apostrophiz[es] the ghost" (*Specters of Marx* 12), that is to say, "a 'who'" (51) who "may always be [...] someone else" (7), "a certain absence. Not pure and simple absence, for there logic could make its claim, but a *certain* absence" ("Violence and Metaphysics" 91), or as Derrida writes elsewhere, "*a certain desert – not the desert of revelation, but a desert* in *the desert*" ("Faith and Knowledge" 55; trans. mod.).

in the name of ghosts

Belief in ghosts should be recognized as an ethical imperative in Derrida's thinking. Indeed, I argue that by drawing attention to the fact that there is more to spectrality than an experience of absence directed towards presence, to wit, an expression of the genealogical dependence of the absolute on the return of the different, Derrida inaugurates a new way of relating to the absolute that sidesteps the pitfalls of idealism without settling for mere nihilistic pragmatism.

Belief in ghost implies a recognition that the absolute is *never given*. This does not mean that the absolute does not exist, but rather that the very idea that something might reach a state of plenitude only appears to us through the repetition of the different. This implies that ideals cannot "serv[e] as a 'cover' [...] while speaking in the name of the other, that which one places before one or behind which one hides" (Derrida, "Passions" 10). The absolute cannot be taken for granted, even if it is recognized as inaccessible. It is, therefore, unfair to suggest that Derrida fosters quiet contemplation before the ever-delayed arrival of ideal justice or an uncompromising sacrificial quest for purity. As far as Derrida is concerned, the only attitude worthy of an ideal is one that respects its spectrality, that is to say, its dependence on the endless coming of the other: it "must be worthy of the name of the other, made in the name of the other" (*Memoires* 150). Disproving accusations of quietism often addressed to Derrida, then, it appears that his ethics carries *an injunction to action*, provided that this action facilitates the coming of the other by challenging existing equilibria.

That does not mean that one must bring about the "repetition of the absolute beginning" (Derrida, *Gift of Death* 80), through radical gestures of *tabula rasa*. It should now be clear that, if one is able to conceive of the existence of the ideal, it is because something of the ideal – its specter – is *already there*, "and [this] apparition is not nothing" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 120). According to Derrida, action worthy of an ideal must inscribe itself within "a spectral logic of inheritance and generations, but a logic turned toward the future no less than the past" (69n2). Responsible action must be carried out *in the name of ghosts*, that is to say, while "recogniz[ing] in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*" (xviii). Practically, this implies that a responsible action "must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case, rejustify it, at least reinvent it in the reaffirmation and the new and free confirmation of its principle" (Derrida, "Force of Law" 23). "That is what deconstruction is made of," Derrida clarified during the Villanova Roundtable, "not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break" ("Villanova Roundtable" 6).

When Derrida criticizes the political model of liberal democracy and the current concept of human rights, when he argues that some distance must be kept with existing laws, norms, and values, then, he does not foster anarchy but rather *awareness of improvability*. By warning that existing ethical concepts and political programs must not be erected to the status of transcendent universals in the name of which one could "neo-evangelize" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 106), he does not threaten the dream of unconditional justice and democracy for all, but rather radicalizes it, making it more ambitious. As a matter of fact, Derrida remarks that democracy is "the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name" (*Rogues* 87). Criticizing and reinventing democracy therefore *itself* appears to be a democratic gesture. Hence Derrida's suggestion that "[t]he to-come of democracy is also, although without presence, the *hic et nunc* of urgency" (29).

Responding to this urgency requires more than a single action, to be sure. It has already been established that the plenitude of the ideal is extrapolated from the repetition of the different, much as balance, on a bicycle, arises from the repetition of pedal strokes. Having gained speed, one may come to think that pedaling is not necessary anymore; that balance has been secured. That is a short-lived illusion: desire for balance implies endless pedaling, without hope of securing one's goal. Rather similarly, Derrida argues that the very idea of the absolute depends not only on the advent of the other, *but on the coming of another other, and yet an other, without possible end*. Ethics worthy of the name, as Derrida sees it, requires the repetition of innovative action, however pragmatic and imperfect. It is as an interminable task, an endless critical effort. Hence Derrida's clarification that, if he may be described as "a seeker of love and justice" ("Terror" 13): "It is not that I am happy with this. It is a suffering" (13). I could not agree more with Tyler Roberts, then: it is *definitely not* the case that Derrida's ethics is "ineffective, mystical, or simply infinitely postponed, for it [...] demands and enables self-critical, engaged action here and now" (279). Dispelling accusations of nihilism *and* idealism, Derrida fosters infinite negotiation between past and future as well as between lucidity and ideality: his attention to – and belief in – the spectrality of the ghost allows him to conciliate the practical necessities of decision-making with an imperative to always dream bigger.

This calls for a reconsideration of the mainstream portrayal of Derrida as a street-corner anarchist seeking to destroy the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment. "True, he is a critic of the Enlightenment," John D. Caputo points out, "but critique is the most honorable of Enlightenment works, even when it is directed at the Enlightenment" (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 54). In line with Caputo's observation, I argue that Derrida's awareness of improvability should be recognized as heir to the spirit of the Enlightenment.[9] In fact, it may even be said to *radicalize this spirit*. By countering the Enlightenment's tendency to close in on the ideal – to abandon criticism after the first pedal stroke, as it were – Derrida warns that their effort is *never* complete. His ethics thus inaugurates "a new Enlightenment for the century to come" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 113), one that, insofar as it fosters belief in ghosts, "necessarily exceeds [...] the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living – or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence)" (78).

theology worthy of the name

Crucially for my purpose, Derridean ethics also points towards a thinking that exceeds the logic that distinguishes or opposes *atheism* and *theism*. In rupture with the prevailing tendency of existing scholarship to categorize Derrida's thinking as *either* strictly atheistic *or* pertaining to the Judeo-Christian moral order, I argue that Derrida's belief in ghosts breaks with theistic fideism without however reducing to atheistic unbelief.

To be sure, that Derrida believes in ghosts says nothing about the (in)existence of the God of monotheism. What it does say, however, is that the very idea that there may exist something worthy of the name God only appears to us through the repetition of the different. The act of naming God draws attention to this genealogy: naming God implies gesturing towards a space beyond determinate reference, towards "the other of the name and quite simply the other, whose irruption the name announces" (Derrida, "*Khôra*" 89). The name of God thus cannot serve as a "cover" for one's action. Divine purity cannot be taken for granted, not even in the form of an unrevealable secret. It is, therefore, misguided to argue that Derrida fosters mystical contemplation or the sacrifice of everything that fails to realize divine purity. Following Derrida, fidelity to God implies steering clear from dogmatism by opening oneself to the coming of the other, this other that the name God always announces. It implies, in other words, "the suspension of the position of God as a thesis" (Derrida, "Epoché and Faith" 47). Hence Caputo's suggestion that, following Derrida, "the most religious thing of all, the greatest passion of religion [...] requires a moment of atheism" ("God and Anonymity" 17–18).

Crucially, Derrida does not thereby threaten religious faith or theological modes of thinking, but rather suggests that "the manner in which the faithful are counted must be changed" ("Faith and Knowledge" 90). He sets his own experience of prayer as an example. Testifying to his Judeo-Christian upbringing, he explains that he tends to imagine his prayers' addressee "as a Father – a severe, just Father with a beard – and also, at the same time, images of a Mother [...] who is ready to forgive me" ("Epoché and Faith" 30). Yet he also notes that his prayers admit another "layer." They are "the experience of a nonbeliever [...] who asks, 'To whom am I praying? Whom am I addressing? Who is God?'" (30). These two layers recall Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's distinction, in *Freud's Moses*, between Judaism understood as a determinate community united around a set of rituals and beliefs, and the indeterminable affirmation of openness to the other-to-come characteristic of Jewishness (89–90). Building on this distinction, Derrida argues that being Jewish requires some degree of unfaithfulness to Judaism; it requires being faithful to a certain Jewishness beyond the limits of Judaism ("Abraham, the Other" 31–32). The cut of circumcision would inaugurate one's identity as a Jew while opening an incurable wound in this identity, indicating that there is no *proper* Jew but the *improper* Jew or, as Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly put it, that commitment to Judaism implies being "at the same time faithful and unfaithful, without [...] ever being able to assess the value of or the limits between faithfulness and unfaithfulness" (158).

This has crucial consequences for thinking the pursuit of peaceful pluralism in the context of rampant violence carried out in the name of God. As far as Derrida is concerned, fidelity to God is not only compatible with, *but itself implies* pluralistic openness. Pluralism, for Derrida, should not be pursued against religious piety, as is generally believed, but in the name of God recognized as (Holy) ghost. The spectrality of the divine does guarantee the possibility of an infinite number of religions and doctrinal interpretations, for none of them can ever be justified in closing in on itself and denying the others' legitimacy. Following Derrida, faith in God implies being *the last and the least* [*les derniers*] of the faithful, the most unworthy of that name and yet thereby the ones who most deserve to be counted among the faithful ("Abraham, the Other" 13). Derrida thereby makes space for a fidelity to God that steers clear from theistic dogmatism and opens new horizons of tolerance, a tolerance which, stretching beyond this term's Christian legacy, would not be ascribable to a single religious tradition but rather be "*in accord with the experience of the 'desert in the desert'*" ("Faith and Knowledge" 60), that is to say, with the spectrality of the (Holy) ghost.

Georgette Derrida should not have doubted her son's faith, then: Derrida's ethical thinking not only makes space for, but itself testifies to a certain faith in God; though, as Derrida himself stressed, "the constancy of God in [his] life is

called by other names" ("Circumfession" 154), the name of the other and the other of the name. As Roberts rightly remarks, however, "this likely is still not enough faith or enough God" for confessional authorities (276). Hence Shakespeare's suggestion that Derrida "provokes us to consider the possibility of doing theology otherwise" (47). Although he does not qualify as a theologian himself, Derrida provokes religious authorities preoccupied with the ever-delayed promise of otherworldly salvation to recognize that theology has "the disruptive force to awaken questioning and to stir thought […] because the name of God is inscribed in theology" (Caputo, *Weakness* 289). Following Derrida, a theology worthy of the name must be worthy of *its* name, worthy of the *theos* in theology, that is to say, of the (Holy) *ghost*. This explains why Caputo has been so tenacious in championing deconstruction in theological circles: exposure to deconstruction "releases theology from the grip of everything that makes theology ridiculous and dangerous and draws opprobrium down upon its head […] [through] a reduction of idolatry and blasphemy, of reification and objectification, of codification and institutionalization, of literalization" (*In Search of Radical Theology* 16).

Twenty years after Derrida's death, then, his ethical thinking could not be more actual: far from plainly disproving or falling within the bounds of existing religious discourses, Derrida's ethical thinking provokes theology to open itself (to the future) thus emerging as a possible antidote to the inertia and dogmatism of certain religious institutions today.[10] Derrida's belief in ghosts makes space for faith beyond theistic dogmatism and atheistic pragmatism; faith understood in terms of pluralistic openness. I agree with Caputo and Michael Scanlon: "Deconstruction thus turns out to be not the final nail in the coffin of the old God, but rather the affirmation of the religious" (4). It not only fosters "a new Enlightenment for the century to come" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 113), but also the possibility of a new religious faith for the contemporary world.

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notes

1 On Derrida's experience growing up as "a French Jewish child from Algeria" (*Monolingualism* 49), see his *Monolingualism of the Other* and "Circumfession."

2 See Derrida, "Circumfession" 154–57.

3 Emphases in quotes are in the original sources, except where indicated otherwise.

4 Jean-Luc Nancy famously picked up upon the notion of the "infinitely finite." See, in particular, Nancy's "Finite History," "Infinite Finitude," and *A Finite Thinking*, as well as Rodolphe Gasché's "'Infinitely Finite': Jean-Luc Nancy on History and Thinking."

5 Details for this conference, including the cited description (which I translated from French) may be found online: https://decolonialisme.fr/?p=6333.

6 Derrida may here be said to pertain to a lineage of French thinkers including Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, Gilles Deleuze, and, more recently, Jean-Luc Nancy, who have sought to rewrite Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence in terms of the return of the Same as different in each occurrence (see Le Rider 198–99).

7 Much more could, and should, be said about the subtle resonance (and divergence) between Deleuze's and Derrida's respective treatment of difference. Because I cannot do so in this paper, I refer the reader to several key works that deal with this issue, including Nancy's "Parallel Differences: Deleuze and Derrida," Paul Patton and John Protevi's *Between Deleuze and Derrida*, and Todd May's *Reconsidering Difference*.

8 For a detailed account of the theological responses to Derrida's thinking of *différance*, see Shakespeare's *Derrida and Theology* as well as to *Deconstruction and Theology*, by Thomas Altizer et al.

9 I thereby also align with scholars such as Christopher Norris, Giovanna Borradori, and James K.A. Smith. See, in particular, Smith's *Jacques Derrida* (88–91), Borradori's preface and introduction to *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Norris's *Uncritical Theory*, and Derrida's "The 'World' of the Enlightenment to Come."

10 For details on the question of the future of religion, and specifically of the Catholic Church, see Caputo's *In Search of Radical Theology* and my own "A Radical Fidelity."

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