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“But Who, We?”: Derrida on Non-Human Others

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“BUT WHO, WE?”:
DERRIDA ON NON-HUMAN OTHERS

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I establish the possibility of social and ethical relationships with non-human natural (and in particular inanimate) beings. I do so based on the work of 20th century French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In chapter 1 I discuss the relatively sparse secondary literature that addresses the intersection between Derrida's work and environmental philosophy. I also go over some textual indications that show that Derrida has been concerned with non-human beings throughout his career.

In chapters 2 and 3 I establish the impossibility of conclusively excluding any kind of being from the purview of ethical responsibility. While chapter 2 develops the nature of Derrida's ethics, chapter 3 ties this conception of ethics back to more theoretical considerations that we find in Derrida's texts.

Chapters 4 to 6 serve to illustrate in a more positive fashion how Derrida might help us to understand the possibility of social and ethical relationships with inanimate beings. Chapter 4 focuses on the notion of the trace in order to show that the presence qua absence that characterizes our experience of human persons can also be discerned in our relationships to inanimate beings. Chapter 5 focuses on Derrida's discussion of a corpse as neither alive nor dead. I argue that this experience of life/death is possible with regard to non-human inanimate beings as well. Finally, in chapter 6 I argue for the possibility of sharing a common world with non-human (including inanimate) beings based on Derrida's conception of habitat and of the world as fractured and constructed.
CHAPTER 1
DERRIDA AND ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

When asked to devise a syllabus for an environmental philosophy class, very few philosophers, I dare say, would think of Jacques Derrida as an important or even relevant author to be included on such a syllabus. And it might seem hard to argue otherwise. Although Derrida did, especially towards the end of his life, explicitly address issues concerning the concept of animality as well as our relationship to animals, he seems to have been conspicuously silent throughout this career on issues concerning environmental destruction or the link between such destruction and anthropocentrism. What I argue in this dissertation is that Derrida, contrary to that first impression, is an author whose work is worth considering in the context of environmental philosophy, i.e. philosophy insofar as it concerns itself with the relationships (ethical, political, social, conceptual, ecological etc.) between humans and non-humans against the backdrop of the multiple forms of environmental destruction that characterize our contemporary way of life.

One of the basic points of connection between environmental philosophy and Derrida's work consists in the fact that both try to understand the possibility of what many today might still consider impossible. One of the driving motivations of Derrida's thought can be found in his tireless examination of conceptual boundaries, limits and divisions insofar as they structure our sense of what is possible. It is in examining and
putting pressure on these boundaries and limits that Derrida also opens these structures to
the possibility of what we would, for now, understand as impossible. Derrida writes: “The
interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience
of the impossible: that is,…the experience of the other as the invention of the impossible,
in other words, as the only possible invention.”

For Derrida, this often takes the form of probing the limits of what he sometimes
calls the metaphysics of presence, i.e. a way of understanding reality as primarily that
which is unequivocally given as present to a consciousness which is present to itself. In
the case of environmental philosophy, one form the thinking of the (currently) impossible
can take is the attempt to conceptualize ethical, social or political relationships to non-
human beings.

In this dissertation, I propose several interrelated ways in which such a
deconstructive invention of the impossible (of metaphysics) can be seen to overlap with
the impossible of environmental philosophy and of human/non-human relationships. In
other words, I aim to show one way in which Derrida's deconstruction of the logocentric
tradition (i.e. the tradition that puts a certain capacity to make the world present by means
of reason and language as the center of what is and of what has value) is also, as Derrida
puts it in his last seminar, a deconstruction of the “humanist and anthropocentric

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1 Derrida, “Psyche” 15(26f.): “L'intérêt de la déconstruction, de sa force et de son désir si elle en a, c'est
une certaine expérience de l'impossible: c'est-à-dire, j'y ferai retour à la fin de cette conférence, de l'autre,
l'expérience de l'autre comme invention de l'impossible, en d'autres termes comme la seule invention
possible.” Where available and appropriate I will, in what follows, always provide the French text in
addition to the English translation (or, at times, the English original) and indicate the French pagination in
parenthesis.
What I aim to show is that Derrida, in performing this deconstruction, can help us to understand the conceptual possibility of both ethical and communal relationships with non-human beings – a possibility, which, as we will see, cannot be strictly separated from material possibilities (such as, for instance, institutional, emotional or cultural possibilities). To be sure, Derrida does not provide us with an environmental ethics or a politics understood as an organized set of specific rules, axioms and guidelines for thought and conduct. He merely opens a door to one way to

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2 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, I, 308f.(411): “The question of responsibility is a question of the threshold, and in particular, as we again verified this year, a threshold at the origin of responsibility, the threshold from which one passes from reaction to response, and therefore to responsibility, a threshold which, according to the humanist and anthropocentric, in truth logocentric, tradition that we are deconstructing here…marks, that is supposed to mark, the indivisible limen, the indivisible limit between animal and man. And we recalled last time that this limit, this threshold of responsibility, is the same as that of liberty, without which there is no responsibility and therefore no sovereignty. Responsibility, like liberty, implies something of that indivisible sovereignty accorded to what is proper to man and denied the beast.” (“La question de la responsabilité est une question du seuil et en particulier, nous l'avons vérifié encore cette année, sur l'origine de la responsabilité, sur le seuil à partir duquel on passe de la réaction à la réponse, donc à la responsabilité, seuil qui, selon la tradition humaniste et anthropocentrique, en vérité logocentrique que nous déconstruisons ici… marque, qui est censé marquer le limen indivisible, la limite indivisible entre l'animal et l'homme. Et cette limite, ce seuil de responsabilité, nous avons rappelé la dernière fois qu'il se confondait avec celui de la liberté sans laquelle il n'est pas de responsabilité et donc pas de souveraineté. La responsabilité, comme la liberté, implique quelque chose de cette souveraineté indivisible accordée au propre de l'homme et refusée à la bête.”).

3 Derrida, “Penseur de l'évènement;” translation mine: “In a certain way, ethical questions have always been there, but if one understands by ethics a system of rules, of moral norms, then no, I do not propose an ethics.” And he continues with a reference to the problem of aporia and – interestingly for our question and, as I want to argue, not coincidentally – to non-human living beings: “That which interests me are, in fact, the aporias of ethics, its limits, in particular surrounding question of the gift, of forgiveness, of the secret, of testimony, of hospitality, of the living – animal or not.” (“D’une certaine manière, les questions éthiques ont toujours été là, mais si l’on entend par éthique un système de règles, de normes morales, alors non, je ne propose pas une éthique. Ce qui m’intéresse, ce sont, en fait, les apories de l’éthique, ses limites, notamment autour des questions du don, du pardon, du secret, du témoignage, de l’hospitalité, du vivant – animal ou non.”). See also Derrida, “Politics and Friendship,” where he says something similar about politics: “I think everything I did was directly or indirectly connected with political questions, and I could show this in a very precise manner. But it is true and it is a fair objection to the extent that this relation to politics was very indirect and very elliptical, and waiting for a moment in the development of my work when the level I wanted to reach in this re-elaboration of the political question could be reached; and this accounts for the delay, for the implicit fashion I addressed this question at the beginning… I don't think that there is such a thing as a deconstructive politics, if by the name ‘politics’ we mean a programme, an agenda, or even the name of a regime.”
understand the possibility of such an ethics or politics. I do by no means want to suggest that the Derridean account of this possibility that I develop here should be seen as more definite or more fundamental than so many other accounts that have been developed by environmental thinkers.\(^4\) We are still (and, as we will see below, for Derrida this period never properly ends), as Anthony Weston put it, in the “long period of experimentation and uncertainty” that “ought to be expected and even welcomed in the originary stages of any new ethics.”\(^5\) We are, in the words of Derrida, in a moment of “errancy,” that must characterize “the departure from the closure of a self-evidence.”\(^6\) This must also be a moment of “multi-vocality.”\(^7\) I propose a way to understand Derrida as one of the relevant voices in our attempt to rethink human/non-human relationships.

I suggest that the particular strength of Derrida's texts lies in his careful and sustained (indeed sustained for several decades) analysis of and critical engagement with the operation of some of the concepts that constitute major support pillars of philosophical anthropocentrism\(^8\) such as responsibility, decision, consciousness, and

\(^4\) There are really more alternative accounts of human/non-human relationships than can be addressed in one dissertation. However, some accounts that exhibit productive similarities with what I propose in this dissertation are David Abram's (see for example his *Spell of the Sensuous*) and Ted Toadvine's versions of eco-phenomenology (see the volume on *Eco-Phenomenology* he edited with Charles S. Brown), Anthony Weston's eco-pragmatism (see for example his collection of essays called *The Incompleat Eco-Philosopher*) and Val Plumwood's ecofeminism (see for example her book *Environmental Culture*). What all of these accounts share with Derrida, I submit, is an emphasis on experience and a corresponding reluctance to rely on static and unitary forms of rationality.


6 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 162.


8 What I mean by philosophical anthropocentrism is anthropocentrism (namely the idea and practice of a domination-oriented human exceptionalism (see below FN 44 and 45)) insofar as it is supported through the conceptual works of philosophers (as opposed to, say, the works of economists or historians, but also as
world. In particular, I am interested in the way Derrida draws out the fragility of the exclusions that these concepts enact by determining our sense of what is possible and what is not. What I suggest then is that we take Derrida seriously as a thinker of impossible possibilities or of possibilities that we cannot yet fully conceptualize and that do not sit well with some of our most basic intuitions. And the possibility I am interested in here, as I said above, is the possibility of responsible and communal relationships with non-human (including inanimate) beings.

In the current chapter 1, I provide a short overview over the relatively scarce secondary literature dealing with Derrida's relevance for environmental ethics. After this, I go over a few indications that show that Derrida's concern for and with the category of the non-human can be found in his texts throughout his career. In chapter 2, I will develop Derrida's conception of ethics as a conception of unlimited responsibility. In chapter 3, I tie this conception of responsibility back to Derrida's conception of originary performativity and différence. In the following chapters 4 to 6, I will go over three interrelated ways to begin to understand the possibility of ethical as well as social relationships to non-human (and, in particular, inanimate) beings. Chapter 4 will serve to illustrate the possibility of ethical relationships to non-human (including inanimate) beings more concretely by developing a fundamental similarity between our experience of human beings, on the one hand, and that of other living as well as non-living beings, on the other hand. The presence/absence of the trace will be of particular importance in opposed to human exceptionalism as enacted through, for instance, consumerism, the legal system or resource extraction).
this context. This will be linked in chapter 5 to Derrida's discussion of the human corpse as an instance of living death in *The Beast and the Sovereign*. In the concluding chapter 6, I argue that Derrida's conception of the world as phantasmatic as well as his notion of habitat can account for the possibility of community with non-human beings. Throughout this dissertation my main focus will be on non-animal and in particular non-living non-human beings. This is because Derrida's treatment of animals and animality has already received a fair amount of attention.

**Two Terminological Clarifications**

Before taking a closer look at the secondary literature, I want to briefly clarify the use of two terms that will be important below. Most of the technical terms I will be using in what follows will receive further clarification as the argument unfolds. However, two preliminary conceptual clarifications might be in order. In what follows I will use “morality” to refer collectively to a set of identifiable, relatively stable practices and/or a set of identifiable implicit or explicit rules of conduct that are taken to allow for the distinction between right and wrong actions. What I take to be distinctive about morality in this sense is not *how* exactly the rightness or wrongness of these actions is determined – whether through, say, a utilitarian, deontological or virtue ethical framework or by an appeal to tradition, religion, emotions or a specific framework of rationality – but *that* the practices and rules in question are relatively⁹ well-defined in both their content and their relation to each other. In moral terms we could say, for example, that both murder and

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⁹ I say ‘relatively’ here, because morality does not exclude the existence and acknowledgement of borderline cases.
hitting somebody is wrong, but that murder is ‘more wrong;’ that throwing a rock in a pond or eating insects is *prima facie* morally permissible; that taking somebody else’s lunch is *prima facie* morally impermissible; that providing first-aid to somebody who has been seriously injured is *prima facie* morally obligatory.

While these statements are probably held to be true by most people within the United States, disagreeing with them would still be a *moral* challenge as it would assume the rules to be different ones, but still relatively well-defined. Morality is thus defined by the relative stability of the norms and practices that constitute it and which it thus requires and demands. Derrida does not provide a moral outlook in this sense. As he puts in in an interview in *L'Humanité*: “In a certain way, ethical questions have always been there, but if one understands by ethics a system of rules, of moral norms, then no, I do not propose an ethics.”

However, Derrida talks about ethics quite a bit. Ethics, in contradistinction to morality, will here be understood as designating the enabling conditions of morality that themselves precede and exceed any specific form of morality. As we will see below, this is also why they are not just the conditions of the possibility of any specific form of morality, but also their condition of impossibility in that they allow for the critique and revision of any such specific set of rules or practices. What counts as morally permissible, obligatory or impermissible would in this sense be an ethical question (in that it relies on certain structures and experiences characteristic of our being-in-the-world that are quasi-transcendental conditions for any form of morality, something which we

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will further determine below), but not necessarily a moral question (unless we are deploying fairly clear meta-ethical guidelines that we take to be themselves of a moral kind). Put shortly, and as we will develop below, ethics concerns a responsive and normative relationship between a self and something other than this self (which might be another self, although not necessarily a self in any classical sense of the world\textsuperscript{11}).

Another term that might be worth clarifying is the term non-human, as the limits between the human and the non-human (not to speak of the post- or the trans-human) are strongly contested these days. What I refer to by the terms ‘non-human’ are entities or contexts that are not usually taken to be primarily\textsuperscript{12} human. This would include all forms of non-human life, but also minerals, landscapes or ecosystems. However, it would exclude artificial entities such as computers or cars from this. I take this to be a mostly stipulative exclusion (although it is one that is maintained in our cultural practices) given that what we produce is neither fully in our control nor conceivable without the natural materials through which is exists and is produced. Furthermore, much of what I have to say here also has implications for how we think about artificial beings or cultural products – in particular what I will say about inanimate beings in chapters 4 to 6.

\textsuperscript{11} It might, that is, not possess any of the following characteristics/qualities: (self-)consciousness, sensation, interests, life, or a clear unifying tendency that could be identified as a \textit{telos}.

\textsuperscript{12} I say primarily because some (such as Bill McKibben in his book \textit{The End of Nature}) have suggested that nothing on the planet is now untouched by humanity anymore (mainly due to climate change). Thus, nothing on the planet would be completely non-human. The notion of the anthropocene (i.e. the idea that we now have entered a new geological age defined through the fact that humans can now be understood to have a marked global influence on the geology and ecology of the earth) would likewise be relevant here. This is insofar as it would indicate that the earth itself would no longer be simply non-human anymore. However, rather than just extending the human further and further, it is also important to recognize the non-human that is part of our very constitution.
Nevertheless, my primary focus here lies in entities that we could conventionally classify as belonging to non-human nature. Thus, this is what I mean to refer to by the category “non-human.” As we will see latter, this can include both entities that possess a relatively clear individual identity as well as contexts the identity of which remains more vague.

The Secondary Literature

While Derrida's engagement with animality and the concept of ‘the animal’ is relatively well-known by now and has received some attention by philosophers working on issues relating to human/animal-relationships, Derrida is not usually thought to have much to say about the non-human world more broadly and in particular inanimate nature. His engagement with the category of the non-human is often hardly mentioned in some of the major works on Derrida's ethics and politics. Where his engagement with the non-human is discussed, it is usually either limited to animals or serves primarily as an

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13 See Carol Adams' Animal Manifesto, Lori Gruen's Animals and Ethics, Gary Steiner's rather critical engagement in Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism, Elisabeth De Fontenay's essays in La Silence des Bêtes and in Sans Offenser le Genre Humain, Calarco's Zoographies, Kelly Oliver's chapters 4 and 5 in her Animal Lessons, or Patrick Llored’s Politique et Éthique de l'Animalité as well as his essay “Comment ne pas manger l'autre.”

14 See Simon Critchley's Ethics of Deconstruction and his Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity, John D. Caputo's Radical Hermeneutics and his Against Ethics as well as Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida, Marko Zlomislic's Jacques Derrida's Aporetic Ethics, Bill Martin's Matrix and Line, Drucilla Cornell's Philosophy of the Limit, Martin Hägglund's Radical Atheism, Nicole Anderson's Derrida. Ethics under Erasure, Torsten Hitz' Derrida's praktische Philosophie, and Dietrich Krauß' Die Politik der Dekonstruktion. A notable exception here is David Wood's book The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction, which contains a whole chapter on ‘ecophenomenology,’ and where Wood talks about “environmental destruction” as the 'eleventh plague’ (184), i.e. as a plague to be added to the ten plagues mentioned in Specters of Marx (see below FN 38).

15 In addition to the references in FN 13 see Leonard Lawlor's This is not sufficient, Francoise Dastur's “L'animal” and “Pour une zoologie privative,” the collected volume Demenageries edited by Anne Emanuelle Berger and Marta Segarra, or Lynn Turner’s edited volume on The Animal Question in Deconstruction.
illustration of certain more general points about alterity or aporia that concern interhuman ethics rather than being seen as indicating or at least opening a space for a concrete concern for singular non-human beings or for the so-called natural environment.\textsuperscript{16}

I will now briefly discuss the limited secondary literature that does exist concerning links that can be drawn between Derrida’s work and environmental philosophy (excluding animal ethics). I will then go over some textual passages in Derrida's work that provide us with a first indication that Derrida's concern for what we call the non-human early on exceeded the question of animals and animality.

While there will finally be a more extensive engagement with Derrida's ‘environmental potential’ in the forthcoming collected volume called \textit{Eco-Deconstruction. Derrida and Environmental Ethics} (edited by David Wood, Matthias Fritsch and Phil Lynes), we might find one of the reasons for the rather belated and still relatively sparse work at the intersection of Derrida studies and environmental philosophy in the perception of Derrida as a thinker of poetry and texts rather than of flesh and earth. An example for an, in this regard, rather typical mentioning of Derrida (though it is somewhat less common today), can be found in Paul Shepard's essay “Virtually Hunting Reality in the Forests of Simulacra.”\textsuperscript{17} As in so many of especially the

\textsuperscript{16} See for example Elizabeth Rottenberg in her introduction to \textit{Negotiations}: “Although the bond between singularities may be something that exceeds the ‘concept of humanity,’ it cannot be opposed to the human: on the contrary, it would seem, it is neither reducible to nor separable from what is called the human” (7). See also Martin Hägglund statement in \textit{Radical Atheism}: “The violent exclusion of democracy is thus not only at work in relation to other ‘humans assumed to be like me’ ([Rogues, T.B.]53/81) but also in relation to ‘the dead, to animals, to trees and rocks’ (54/82). Derrida is not advocating that we should include all these others in democracy and abandon hierarchies. Rather, he aims to show that democracy must violate the principle of equality that it defends” (175).

\textsuperscript{17} It is also rather telling that in a collected volume called \textit{Reinventing nature? Responses to postmodern
early ‘engagements’ with Derrida's work, the latter's name (alongside those of other so-called postmodernists\textsuperscript{18}) is used here as a short hand for those who are all-too occupied with textual analysis and all-too trapped by the lures of culture to have anything meaningful to contribute to a discourse centered in the earth, the soil and its inhabitants. For Shepard, Derrida’s view ultimately is one where the task of “human organisms is to replace the world with webs of words, sounds, and signs that refer only to other such constructions.”\textsuperscript{19} It thus marks “the final step away from connection” and towards a certain “denial”\textsuperscript{20} of the natural world on which we depend and which must be seen as central to any notion of reality. As I will argue below, this position rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of what Derrida aims to do.

A critique that goes in a somewhat similar direction (although it is based on an informed and defensible engagement with Derrida's work) can be found in the work of Timothy Clark. Clark argues that, while \textit{Of Grammatology} provided a promising opening towards a different, more ecological understanding of nature as well as a more situated notion of human agency, this opening was closed again after this book. Thus, he writes that Derrida in \textit{Of Grammatology} “opens…a space – if only briefly and formally – for thinking some of the philosophical ramifications of the human understood as a function of an interplay of multiple contexts and non-human agencies, in effect, of a

d\textit{deconstruction}, Derrida is only mentioned once, namely in Shepard's essay.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 25.
deconstructive environmental history.” Clark, despite his criticism of the way Derrida in his texts engaged or failed to engage with contemporary questions of nature and environment, nevertheless does recognize the general potential of deconstruction in addressing environmental questions. He thinks it is possible to think the originary trace in terms of “originary environmentality.” However, “in effect, *Of Grammatology* opened a space for a deconstructive conception of the constitutive place of nonhuman agency in the human sphere, only for it to be closed again.” In accordance with this, Clark writes in another essay that “environmental questions look like a perplexing and seemingly expanding absence or even evasion in Derrida’s thinking, one it is still hard to know how to understand or address.” An indication for this can, according to Clark, be found in the fact that ten plagues Derrida lists in *Specters of Marx* are “entirely confined to human-human interactions.”

This has also been pointed out by Tom Cohen in as essay where he notes that in Derrida's list “there is no mention of ‘climate change,’ oil, mass extinctions, toxification, water and so on.” This is taken by Cohen not as a coincidence, but “already a textual

21 Clark, “Climate Change and Catastrophe,” 164.

22 Ibid., 162.

23 Ibid., 168.

24 Clark, “Climate Change Ironies,” 132.

25 Clark, “Climate Change and Catastrophe,” 168.

mark”\textsuperscript{27} that indicates how the pressure that climate change and environmental degradation puts on the entire culture from within which Derrida wrote cannot but divide deconstruction against itself. These pressures (the possibility of which Derrida could not have denied) force deconstruction to begin thinking about a future that might be catastrophic in ways that go beyond the most common concerns of Derrida's and other deconstructive texts.\textsuperscript{28}

One possible response to these more informed criticisms has been formulated by Sean Gaston who cautions that these critiques, by criticizing the absence of the environment or the earth in Derrida's work, forget one of the most important lessons of deconstruction, namely that we should be cautious about any absolute reference points. We should, in other words, not assume that the earth is a kind of transcendental signifier that can tell us by itself how to approach it and how to ground a more ecological thought.\textsuperscript{29} What I will argue below (and in particular in the final chapter 6) is that, while this caution is justified, there are other modes of ecological thinking that Derrida’s opens.

Another angle that has served as an entry-point to weigh Derrida's relevance for environmental thought is the question of nature. Matthias Fritsch argues based on Derrida's engagement with Marcel Mauss’ work on the gift in \textit{The Gift of Death} as well

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 74.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. 86: “The zombie deconstruction of today – like much else (zombie banks, zombie democracy) – stands to be re-invigorated by what it can only crash against and redistribute itself within, at the sacrifice of (its) capital, and name: the ahorizons of ‘climate change.’”

\textsuperscript{29} Gaston, “Derrida and the Eco-Polemicists,” 344: “[A] posthuman, earth-centred criticism [which Gaston finds in Clark and Cohen, T.B.] generates a limited concept of world and treats the earth as the idealized other of philosophy.”
as his account of différance that there is room in Derrida to think nature as marking the space of an originary gift that carries a certain obligation. It would be that which conditions any form of subjectivity, but which cannot be appropriated by us.\textsuperscript{30} This question of that which cannot be appropriated will be important for us as well throughout this dissertation. Makoto Katsumori, in a somewhat similar vein, suggests that Derrida allows us to think about nature not as origin, but as unsupplementable singularity.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, in addition to criticizing the notion of origin, Derrida also argues against “the myth of full substitution.”\textsuperscript{32} In this sense, nature would have to be thought aporetically as “the supplementarity of the unsupplementable.”\textsuperscript{33} The general structure Katsumori outlines here is somewhat similar to the aporetic relation between singularity and general structures on which I rely below. However, I remain more skeptical of the possibility of redeeming the concept of nature in the singular, even if we reinterpret it. It seems too closely bound to the notion of a totality.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{30} Thus, nature “does not only name the desire for the origin, but also the unknowable elemental that turns and re-turns, non-cyclically, in all gifts” (Fritsch, “The Gift of Nature,” 2). Fritsch relies on Derrida's question in \textit{Given Time} “How is one to behave with regard to this originary productivity, chance and necessity of donating nature \textit{(la nature donatrice)}?” (\textit{Given Time}, 128/163f., cited in “The Gift of Nature,” 19), in order to suggest that nature can be thought as that which gives us our being as subjects. He writes: “While it necessarily precedes gifts and the social relations they establish, this nature also exceeds them precisely by its fortuity and withdrawal. Understood in neither a pre-modern nor a post-Cartesian way, nature is a possible name for the context in which alone subjectivities, human and non-human, can come to affirm themselves. While selves cannot be entirely removed from nature, their iterated ex-appropriations and futural recontextualisations cannot but seek independence from it” (ibid.).

\textsuperscript{31} Katsumori defines “the unsupplementable” as “the self-displacing excess of singularity over all that is substitutable and replaceable” (“The Question of Nature,” 69).

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. 70.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34} Another point that remains, in my opinion, problematic in Katsumori's essay is the equation of animals and animality with nature, something which Derrida would be critical of and which is precisely a case of a
Maybe the most insistent engagement with Derrida's work in an environmental context has been offered by David Wood, who – despite a certain focus on the living in Derrida's and in Wood's own work\(^{35}\) – argues that deconstruction should be able to adopt what he calls a “strategic materialism”\(^{36}\) that makes room to reckon with all the ways our environments affect us. In particular, Wood suggests that the way that Derrida has always paid attention to the instability of inside-outside distinctions is relevant to environmental thinking. The capitalist tendency to externalize costs (including environmental costs) and internalizing benefits, for example, can be seen as a tendency towards “toxic identities”\(^{37}\) that can and ought to be questioned. Such a questioning would correspond to a recognition of our dependency on the presumed outside of our various environments. Another connection point between environmental thought and deconstruction that Wood identifies is the way that the present is haunted by the past (of environmental degradation) and the future (of things like climate change that have already been set in motion).\(^{38}\) Finally, he also points out that Derrida, during a Q&A session, showed himself problematic substitution.

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\(^{35}\) Wood talks only about “a parliament of the living” (43; my emphasis) in his essay “On the way to econstruction.”

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 39. These are identities that “flourish to the extent that they can excrete their waste products into a relatively cost-free outside” (ibid.).

\(^{38}\) Wood writes: “Here Derrida’s sense of the past haunting us, especially that past that we thought we could bury (such as the thinking of Marx), is apposite. We frequently hear the claim that if we stopped all carbon emissions today, the atmosphere would continue to warm into the foreseeable future from the effects of past CO2 emissions. And in environmental thinking, there is no shortage of concrete ways of understanding the idea that our time is out of joint. It is a truism that the present is overlaid by past and future” (ibid., 39).
to be open to the possibility of understanding environmental destruction as an eleventh plague to add to the plagues listed in *Specters of Marx*. While what Wood points out here is crucial, he does focus mostly on the living. In what follows I want to go beyond this and think about inanimate beings and structures as not just something we depend on but, maybe, someone we interact with.

Probably the first author to explicitly relate Derrida's thinking to the question of the natural environment was Robert Briggs in his essay “Wild thoughts: a deconstructive environmental ethics?” In this essay Briggs suggests that one can productively link the notion of environment and Derrida's idea of context both in order to draw attention to the material side of Derrida's notion of context as well as in order to obtain a less static and unitary notion of environment. Derrida can help us to see ‘environment,’ like context, as not simply separable from its presumed inside. Derrida's notion of context, Briggs writes, “does ‘complicate’ the limit between decision and context, entity and environment, inside and outside.” Specifically, environments should never be thought as closed or as singular, something we will return to in chapter 6 in relation to Derrida's notion of habitat. He also relates Derrida's work to Anthony Weston's eco-pragmatism as well as Birch's notion of universal moral consideration. While the former argues that we cannot

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39 Ibid., 45, FN 8.

40 Briggs, “Wild thoughts,” 120.

41 Ibid., 123: “Part of what constitutes one's environment, in other words, is the (necessary) possibility that one may find oneself outside of it. An environment is never entirely closed, therefore, to ‘The Environment’ (in general) or to other possible specific environments. Conversely, what is depicted as ‘The Environment’ may function nevertheless as a specific environment – at least for the new environmentalists whom Copper claims hold on to such a concept of ‘The Environment.’…[A]n environment may be ‘relatively firm’ – ‘neither absolutely solid nor entirely closed’ – but never ‘purely and simply identical to itself.’”
transcend our socio-historical conditions in favor of an objective point of view (i.e. one without a specific context), the latter suggest that we (thus) have to be prepared to question our conceptions of ethics over and over again. This is related to Derrida via Caputo's reading of Derrida's ethics as opening us to all sorts of other (including non-human others).

Especially part I of this dissertation is, in its origins, somewhat inspired by the link Briggs draw between the deconstructive notion of alterity and universal moral consideration (and Matthew Calarco has made a similar argument, although mainly with reference to Levinas\textsuperscript{42}). However, both Briggs and Calarco never explain this fully with reference to what Matthias Fritsch has called the infra-structures of Derrida's thought. Their arguments remain fairly abstract in that they never offer an account of alterity, ethics and responsibility that would explain why exactly alterity and thus responsibility cannot be conclusively limited. This is something I propose to do in chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation. This can understood as the first part of the dissertation.

In the second part, namely chapters 4 to 6, I propose a more concrete understanding of how we could think the possibility of ethical and social relationships with non-human nature and in particular with inanimate nature. The leading question in the background there is how Derrida's texts can help us to think less violent relationships to non-human others.

I will now present a short survey of some of Derrida's works in order to show that, while concern with the non-human (including the non-animal) might not have been at the

\textsuperscript{42} Calarco, “Agnostic Animal Ethic,” 80f.
center of Derrida's work (assuming for a moment that there is such a center), it nevertheless was present in it throughout his career. What should become apparent is that Derrida has been concerned, both in epistemological and ontological as well as ethico-political ways, with the question of our conception of and our relationship to that which is non-human (including the non-animal and the inanimate) throughout his work.

Specifically, I am interested in this section and in this dissertation in the question of what is often called “non-human nature”⁴³ insofar as it extends beyond animals. This survey will serve to give a first indication that the skepticism regarding Derrida’s relevance for ecological and environmental thinking (that we saw voiced both by those friendly to and knowledgeable about his work and by those less so) needs to be complicated. It should also be noted that the following text passages are only meant as a first indication of the pervasiveness of the theme of the non- or other-than-human in Derrida's work. Thus, I will not discuss any of these passages in detail in this section. However, I will return to several of them in the following chapters.

**The Primary Literature**

Nature and *Physis*: The Non-Human as a General Category

Long before showing any explicitly ethico-political concern with the non-human, Derrida already articulates what will become part of the basis for his later more explicit

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⁴³Although Derrida (as we will see in more detail below) would be the first to problematize the distinction between nature and its opposites (such as the artificial or technology) and although nature itself is a rather ambiguous term (see for example Kate Soper's *What is nature?*), the designation ‘non-human nature’ seems to be the best short-hand for both animate and inanimate parts of earth (and its vicinity) that are neither human nor were created by human beings.
critique of anthropocentrism (understood here in the sense of both ontological\textsuperscript{44} and normative\textsuperscript{45} human exceptionalism). He articulates this basis as part of his rethinking of the constitution of meaning, self-consciousness and language (in the broadest sense) along the lines of the trace, \textit{différance}\textsuperscript{46} and generalized writing. It is these latter notions that exceed what we think of as human. They do so partly by beginning to break down classical dichotomies such as nature/culture or animal/human that are absolutely central to the way we think about the relation between humans and anything non-human today.

Thus, as early as “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” first published in 1966, Derrida talks about the “the history of the possibility of symbolism \textit{in general}” as having to be situated

\textsuperscript{44} This kind of exceptionalism – which often carries normative implications – assumes that humans are not just unique within nature (every species is), but that their uniqueness has a special relevance. A version of this is Heidegger’s insistence that only humans have a world and thus access to the ‘as such,’ while animals are poor in world and lack any access to the ‘as such.’ Thus, Heidegger claims that a lizard lying on a rock, unlike \textit{Dasein} (which effectively means a human being), has no relation to the rock as such (\textit{Fundamental Concepts}, 197(290)). Generally, the attempt to establish such unique relevance takes the form of designating a specific feature of human existence both as unique to humans as well as as uniquely relevant. As Derrida points out in \textit{The Animal} (5) this list involves for example nudity, laughing, mourning, the gift, burial, speech, reason, logos, or history.

\textsuperscript{45} This kind of exceptionalism is often rooted in or linked to ontological exceptionalism. In its strong form it holds that only humans have intrinsic moral value and thus that we only have direct moral responsibilities towards humans. In its weak form it holds that while non-humans may have intrinsic moral value, their value is always superseded by the intrinsic moral value of humans. While Derrida clearly rejects any strong form of anthropocentrism, his position on weak anthropocentrism would be more complicated. While he is wary of declaring an equality of rights and moral worth for example for certain animals and certain human beings (see “Violence against animals,” 66-68 (111-114)), this is mainly because of the insufficiency he finds in any discourse that relies on abstract equality. Specifically, his genetic quasi-phenomenological account of moral responsibility (which would put him closer to certain relational accounts of ethics such as those develops by certain ecofeminists such a Val Plumwood or Vandana Shiva) would not easily accommodate talk of intrinsic value – especially if understood as objective and stable moral worth. This is also due to his critique of the ‘in itself’ and the ‘as such’ (which manifests itself here through the qualifier ‘intrinsic’).

\textsuperscript{46} I what follows I will use the original French spelling for \textit{différance} (as opposed to \textit{differance} or \textit{difference}). However, I will not italicize the word based on the fact that the term can now be seen as part of the English-language vocabulary of Continental philosophy. Where I quote and English-language translation, however, I will use the spelling and formatting the translator used.
“before the distinction between man and animal, and even before the distinction between the living and the nonliving.” One year later, Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology* that the trace “must be thought before the opposition of nature and culture, animality and humanity, etc.”

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47 Derrida, “Scene of Writing,” 247(294): “...histoire de la possibilité symbolique en général (avant la distinction entre l'homme et l'animal et même entre vivant et non-vivant).” See also *Of Grammatology*, 47f./69f.

48 *Of Grammatology*, 70(103): “If the trace, archi-phenomenon of ‘memory,’ which must be thought before the opposition of nature and culture, animality and humanity, etc., belongs to the very movement of signification, then signification is a priori written, whether inscribed or not, in one form or another, in a ‘sensible’ and ‘spatial’ element that is called ‘exterior.’” (“Si la trace, archi-Phénomène de la ‘mémoire,’” qu'il faut penser avant l'opposition entre nature et culture, animalité et humanité, etc., appartient au mouvement même de la signification, celle-ci est a priori écrite, qu'on l'inscrire ou non, sous une forme ou sous une autre, dans un élément ‘sensible’ et ‘spatial,’ qu'on appelle ‘extérieur.’”). This relates to the fact that writing (and the trace would be a form of writing (ibid.)) “…cannot be thought without an unquestioning faith in the entire system of differences between *physis* and its other (the series of its ‘others:’ art, technology, law, institution, society, immotivation, arbitrariness, etc.), and in all the conceptuality disposed within it.” (103/152; translation modified: “[O]n ne peut penser l’écriture sans cesser de se fier, comme à une évidence allant de soi, à tout le système des différences entre la *physis* et son autre (la série de ses ‘autres:’ l’art, la technique, la loi, l’institution, la société, l’immotivation, l’arbitraire, etc.) et à toute la conceptualité qui s’y ordonne.”).

One context in which Derrida elaborates on the way that the trace defies the nature/culture distinction is when investigating Saussure's notion of the arbitrary nature of the sign. Derrida employs Saussure's notion of the arbitrary nature of the sign to lead towards the idea of the “unmotivated trace” ("trace immotivée"), which “is not more natural (it is not the mark, the natural sign, or the index in the Husserlian sense) than cultural, not more physical than psychic, biological than spiritual. It is that starting from which a becoming-unmotivated of the sign, and with it all the ulterior oppositions between *physis* and its other, is possible.” (47f.69f.): “[L]a trace dont nous parlons n'est pas plus naturelle (elle n'est pas la marque, le signe naturel, ou l'indice au sens husserlien) que culturelle, pas plus physique que psychique, biologique que spirituelle. Elle est ce à partir de quoi un devenir-immotivé du signe est possible, et avec lui toutes les oppositions ultérieures entre la *physis* et son autre.”). The notion of the arbitrariness of the sign points beyond these oppositions because, on the one hand, the arbitrary institution of the sign does precisely indicate that the institution of the signifier does (as Saussure puts it) not “depend on the free choice of the speaking subject” (46(68); translation modified. The translation Spivak uses renders the phrase “le signifiant dépend du libre choix du sujet parlant” as “the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker.”). This would indicate that the sign is not a cultural institution that involves purposeful action. However, at the same time, the arbitrariness of the sign (which is also how Derrida thinks the trace) precisely also indicates that “it [the trace, T.B.] has no ‘natural attachment’ to the signified within reality.” (46(68); emphasis mine: “[E]lle n’a aucune attaché naturelle avec le signifié dans la réalité.”). That the notion of the arbitrary escapes the division between the natural and the cultural only makes sense in that it (as the characteristic of *any* relation between signifier and signified) makes it possible to establish this division. Thus, the notion of the arbitrary helps Derrida to develop the idea of the trace as escaping the nature/culture division. See also ibid., 32f.49f.: “If one considers the now recognized fragility of the notions of pictogram, ideogram etc., and the uncertainty of the frontiers between so-called pictographic, ideographic, and phonetic scripts, one realizes not only the unwiseness of the Saussurian limitation but the
Yet another year later, in 1968, we read the following in Derrida's famous *Différance* essay:

Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (the intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred; the concept as different and deferred, differing-deferring intuition; culture as nature different and deferred, differing-deferring; all the others of *physis* – *tekhné*, *nomos*, *thesis*, society, freedom, history, mind, etc. – as *physis* different and deferred, or as *physis* differing and deferring. *Physis as différance* [Physis en différence].

What we already begin to see here is that what Derrida works towards is not an erasure of difference, but, as Derrida insists later, a proliferation of differences. We need for general linguistics to abandon an entire family of concepts inherited from metaphysics – often through the intermediary of a psychology – and clustering around the concept of arbitrariness. All this refers, beyond the nature/culture opposition, to a supervening opposition between *physis* and *nomos*, *physis* and *techne*, whose ultimate function is perhaps to derive historicity; and, paradoxically, not to recognize the rights of history, production, institutions etc., except in the form of the arbitrary and in the substance of naturalism. (“Si l'on songe à la fragilité maintenant reconnue des notions de pictogramme, d'idéogramme, etc., à l'incertitude des frontières entre les écritures dites pictographiques, idéographiques, phonétiques on mesure non seulement l'imprudence de la limitation saussurienne mais la nécessité pour la linguistique générale d'abandonner toute une famille de concepts hérités de la métaphysique – souvent par l'intermédiaire d'une psychologie – et qui se groupent autour du concept d'arbitraire. Tout cela rendue, par-delà l'opposition nature/culture, à une opposition survenue entre *physis* et *nomos*, *physis* et *techne* dont l'ultime fonction est peut-être de *dériv er* l'historicité; et, paradoxalement, de ne reconnaître ses droits à l'historie, à la production, à l'institution, etc., que sous la forme de l'arbitraire et sur un fond de naturalisme.”).

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49 Derrida, “Différance,” 17(18f); translation modified: “On pourrait ainsi reprendre tous les couples d'opposition sur lesquels est construite la philosophie et dont vit notre discours pour y voir non pas s'effacer l'opposition mais s'annoncer une nécessité telle que l'un des termes y apparaîsse comme la différence de l'autre, comme l'autre différé dans l'économie du même (l'intelligible comme différant du sensible, comme sensible différé; le concept comme intuition différée — différente; la culture comme nature différencée — différente; tous les autres de la *physis* — *tekhné*, *nomos*, *thesis*, société, liberté, histoire, esprit, etc. — comme *physis* différée ou comme *physis* différencée. *Physis en différence*...” Bass translates “*Physis en différence*” as “*Physis in différence*.” However, another possible translation would be “*Physis as différence*.” Given that the ‘law of différence’ applies to nature as well as to its others – such that for example *tekhné* would not just be *physis* differing-deferring, but also vice versa (see “Nietzsche and The Machine,” 244) – it seems that the phrase is intentionally ambiguous. For our purposes though (of arriving at an alternative assessment concept of nature) the translation we chose here seems more interesting.

50 Derrida, “Violence against Animals,” 72(121): “I spoke not only of *one* division, but of several divisions
cannot operate without oppositions in general, but we cannot trust any particular pair of opposites either. As Derrida puts it in “Structure, Sign and Play” regarding “the opposition physis/nomos, physis/technē：“ There is (as for example Levi-Strauss' experienced in the context of the incest prohibition) both “the necessity of utilizing this opposition and the impossibility of accepting it [or of trusting it: de lui faire crédit, T.B.].”

51 It is this trust in certain categories and distinctions at work in our ethical thought (among them the distinction between the human and its others such as the animal or

in the major modes defining ‘animal’ cultures. Far from erasing limits, I recalled them and insisted on differences and heterogeneities.” (“J'ai parlé non seulement d'une coupure, mais de plusieurs coupures dans les grands modes de cultures ‘animales’. Loin d'effacer les limites, je les ai rappelées et j'ai insisté sur les différences et les hétérogénéités.”). See also Derrida, The Animal, 29-31(50-54).

51 Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play,” 357(415): “Since the statement of the opposition physis/nomos, physis/technē, it has been relayed to us by means of a whole historical chain which opposes 'nature' to law, to education, to art, to techniques—but also to liberty, to the arbitrary, to history, to society, to the mind, and so on. Now, from the outset of his researches, and from his first book (The Elementary Structures of Kinship) on, Lévi-Strauss simultaneously has experienced the necessity of utilizing this opposition and the impossibility of accepting it. In the Elementary Structures, he begins from this axiom or definition: that which is universal and spontaneous, and not dependent on any particular culture or on any determinate norm, belongs to nature. Inversely, that which depends upon a system of norms regulating society and therefore is capable of varying from one social structure to another, belongs to culture. These two definitions are of the traditional type. But in the very first pages of the Elementary Structures Lévi-Strauss, who has begun by giving credence to these concepts, encounters what he calls a scandal, that is to say, something which no longer tolerates the nature/culture opposition he has accepted, something which simultaneously seems to require the predicates of nature and of culture. This scandal is the incest prohibition. The incest prohibition is universal; in this sense one could call it natural. But it is also a prohibition, a system of norms and interdicts; in this sense one could call it cultural.” (”Depuis l'opposition physis/nomos, physis/technē, elle est relayée jusqu'à nous par toute une chaîne historique opposant la 'nature' à la loi, à l'institution, à l'art, à la technique, mais aussi à la liberté, à l'arbitraire, à l'histoire, à la société, à l'esprit, etc. Or dès l'ouverture de sa recherche et dès son premier livre (les Structures élémentaires de la parenté), Lévi-Strauss a éprouvé à la fois la nécessité d'utiliser cette opposition et l'impossibilité de lui faire crédit. Dans les Structures, il part de cet axiome ou de cette définition : appartiennent à la nature ce qui est universel et spontané, ne dépendant d'aucune culture particulière et d'aucune norme déterminée. Appartient en revanche à la culture ce qui dépend d'un système de normes régissant la société et pouvant donc varier d'une structure sociale à l'autre. Ces deux définitions sont de type traditionnel. Or, dès les premières pages des Structures, Lévi-Strauss qui a commencé à accroître ces concepts, rencontre ce qu'il appelle un scandale, c'est-à-dire quelque chose qui ne tolère plus l'opposition nature/culture ainsi reçue et semble requérir à la fois les prédicats de la nature et ceux de la culture. Ce scandale est la prohibition de l'inceste. La prohibition de l'inceste est universelle; en ce sens on pourrait la dire naturelle; – mais elle est aussi une prohibition, un système de normes et d'interdits – et en ce sens on devrait la dire culturelle.”).
nature) that Derrida put under increasing pressure.

Indeed, there are similar questionings concerning the opposition between the human and the non-human and nature and its others almost three decades later in *Archive Fever*, but also, more than three decades later, in *On Touching*. In both cases, we see this time a more explicit, though still qualified and indirect, reference to a certain kind of (pre-)normativity through the notion of commandment. In *On Touching* (published in 2000) Derrida writes:

Here, before any other (religious, ethical, juridical, or other) determination, we hear and understand law as commandment, which is to say the interruption in the contact or continuity with what we have learned to call ‘nature.’ Now, one can speak of tact (for example), and contact without contact, only where there is a law dictating or prescribing, and enjoining what is not (natural). And this is produced in ‘nature,’ well before man, and always before the distinction between the beings and the living. And that is enough to discredit every opposition fundamentally: nature/culture, nature/mind or consciousness, *physis/nomos, thesis or techne*, animality/humanity, and so forth.²

Something similar was already present in “Archive Fever” (first presented in 1994 and published in 1995) where Derrida talked about “a chain of belated and problematic oppositions between *physis* and its others, *thesis, tekhnē, nomos*, etc.,” in the context of law and the commandment.³

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² *On Touching*, 68(83f.): “Par Loi, avant toute autre détermination (religieuse, éthique, juridique ou autre), nous entendons ici le commandement, à savoir l'interruption du contact ou de la continuité avec ce qu'on a appris à appeler 'nature.' Or on ne peut parler de tact (par exemple), et de contact sans contact, que là où une loi vient dicter ou prescrire, enjoindre ce qui n'est pas (naturel). Et cela se produit dans la 'nature' bien avant l'homme, toujours avant la distinction entre des étants et des vivants. Ce qui suffir à discréditer en son fond toute opposition nature/culture, nature/esprit ou conscience, *physis/nomos, thesis ou tekhnē*, animalité/humanité, etc.”

³ “Archive Fever,” 9(11f.): “Let us begin at the beginning, not even at the archive. But rather at the word ‘archive’ – and with the archive of so familiar a word. Arkhē, we recall, names at once the commencement and the commandment. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things commence – physical, historical, or ontological principle – but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods command, there where authority, social order are
All these references to nature and to *physis*\(^{54}\) would of course have to be read and understood in their respective contexts. I do not mean to suggest that, in each case, Derrida makes the same point, or that these points directly, exclusively or even primarily concern questions of environmental ethics and philosophy. All I am interested in here is

exercised, in this place from which order is given – nomological principle. *There, we said, and in this place*. How are we to think of *there*? And this *taking place* or this *having a place*, this *taking the place one has* of the *arkhē*? We have there two orders of order: *sequential* and *jussive*. From this point on, a series of cleavages will incessantly divide every atom of our lexicon. Already in the *arkhē* of the commencement, I alluded to the commencement according to nature or according to history, introducing surreptitiously a chain of belated and problematic oppositions between *physis* and its others, *thesis*, *tekhē*, *nomos*, etc., which are found to be at work in the other principle, the nomological principle of the *arkhē*, the principle of the commandment. All would be simple if there were one principle or two principles. All would be simple if the *physis* and each one of its others were one or two. As we have suspected for a long time, it is nothing of the sort, yet we are forever forgetting this. There is always more than one-and more or less than two. In the order of the commencement as well as in the order of the commandment.” (“*Ne commençons pas au commencement, ni même à l'archive. Mais au mot ‘archive’ – et par l'archive d'un mot si familier. Arkhē, rappelons-nous, nommée à la fois le commencement et le commandement. Ce nom coordonne apparemment deux principes en un: le principe selon la nature ou l'histoire, là où les choses commencent – principe physique, historique ou ontologique –, mais aussi le principe selon la loi, là où des hommes et des dieux commandent, là où s'exerce l'autorité, l'ordre social, en ce lieu depuis lequel l'ordre est donné – principe nomologique. Là où, avons-nous dit, et en ce lieu. Comment penser là ? Et cet avoir lieu ou ce prendre place de l'arkhē ? Il y aurait donc là deux ordres d'ordre: séquentiel et jussique. Une série de clivages, dès lors, ne cesserà plus de diviser chaque atome de notre lexique. Déjà dans l'arkhē du commencement, j'ai fait allusion au commencement selon la nature ou selon l'histoire, introduisant subrepticement une chaîne d'oppositions tardives et problématiques entre la *phūsis* et ses autres, *thésis*, *tékhē*, *nómo*, etc., qui se trouvent à l'œuvre dans l'autre principe, le principe nomologique de l'arkhē, le principe du commandement. Tout serait simple s'il y avait un principe ou deux principes. Tout serait simple si la *phūsis* et chacun de ses autres fussent un ou deux. Or il n'en est rien, nous le soupçonnons depuis longtemps mais nous l'oubliions toujours. Il y a toujours plus d'un - et plus ou moins que deux. Dans l'ordre du commencement aussi bien que dans l'ordre du commandement.”)

\(^{54}\) Derrida does at times distinguish between nature and *physis*, such that he sees the latter as more fundamental (most evidently in a historical sense). Thus, he writes for example in “What I Would...:” “Where does the cultural begin? Is it not necessary to initiate once again a patient meditation on all the oppositions that construct the value of ‘culture’? Does it begin wherever nature leaves off? Not *physis* but nature, which happens much later. Does it follow the trajectory of that long chain of meanings (*nomos, thesis, tekhē* – often opposed to *physis* – and then society, spirit, freedom, history, etc.) that have, one after the other, fixed the limits of ‘nature’?” (63f./86f.): “Où commence le culturel? Ne faut-il pas une fois encore s'engager dans une méditation patiente sur toutes les oppositions qui construisent la valeur de ‘culture’? Celle-ci commence-t-elle partout où s'arrête, non pas la *physis* mais, beaucoup plus tard, la nature? Suit-elle le trajet de cette longue chaîne de significations (*nomos, thesis, tekhē* – souvent opposés à *physis* – puis société, esprit, liberté, histoire, etc.) qui ont tour à tour simplement délimité la ‘nature’?”). See also *Of Grammatology*, 32f.(49f.), “The Linguistic Circle,” 152(183), “White Mythology,” 226(269) and *Echographies of Television*, 133(148).
to indicate that there is a continuous and insistent questioning of the human/non-human
distinction (often through the questioning of the distinction between *physis* and its others) to be found in Derrida's work from the very beginning. The question of what exactly this means for environmental philosophy is something we will only take up later when we ask if and how that which Derrida places here before the human/animal and the nature/culture as well as the *physis/nomos* distinction – but also before ethics properly speaking – plays a role in ethical life.

However, what these passages suggest at the very least is that we should be philosophically wary of the nature/non-nature, human/non-human distinction on an ontological and epistemic level, as they might be philosophically unreliable as a way to structure and understand the world and ourselves. And if this is the case on the level of theoretical philosophy, we might want to be similarly critical of these distinctions in the realm of practical philosophy and in our moral lives. Derrida says as much about the human/animal distinction in a conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy in 2004: “This blind confidence in the distinction between the human and the animal...is not only a philosophical and scientific abdication but an ethical one.”

Fifteen years before this interview, in “Force of Law” Derrida presents the deconstructive problematization of the distinction between *physis* and its others (specifically *nomos*) as one of the clearest indications of deconstruction's ethical orientation.

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55 Derrida, “Responsibility,” 83(197): “C'est non seulement une démission philosophique et scientifique, c'est une démission éthique, cette confiance aveugle accordée à la distinction entre l'homme et l'animal, comme la confiance accordée plus généralement à la distinction entre répondre et réagir. Et ça, c'est toute la question de l'animal, dont tu sais qu'elle m'occupe beaucoup ailleurs, dont je dis juste un mot maintenant.”

56 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 235(22): “Besides, it was normal, foreseeable, and desirable that studies of
In line with both of these indications, Derrida returned to his early propositions about the unreliability of the numerous human/non-human distinctions in his last – and much more explicitly ethico-politically oriented – seminar on The Beast and the Sovereign, where he says: “The only rule that for the moment I believe we should give ourselves in this seminar is no more to rely on commonly accredited oppositional limits between what is called nature and culture, nature/law, physis/nomos, God, man, and animal or concerning what is ‘proper to man’ [no more to rely on commonly accredited oppositional limits] than to muddle everything and rush, by analogism, toward resemblances and identities.”

57 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, I, 15f. (36): “La seule règle que, pour l'instant, je crois qu'il faut se donner dans ce séminaire, c'est aussi bien de ne pas se fier à des limites oppositionnelles communément accréditées entre ce qu'on appelle nature et culture, nature/loi, physis/nomos, Dieu, l'homme et l'animal, ou encore autour d'un “propre de l'homme”, [aussi bien de ne pas se fier à des limites oppositionnelles communément accréditées] que, néanmoins, de ne pas tout mélanger et ne pas se précipiter, par analogisme, vers des
And what the latter part of this quote indicates is that Derrida, as we will see in a moment, in questioning these limits is not just worried about the value (pragmatic or epistemic) of general categories, but also about non-human beings in their singularity.

Especially in Derrida's later work on animals there are passages that carry Derrida's early rather theoretical concerns for the human/non-human distinction over into the realm of practical philosophy. And, importantly, Derrida's concerns here are not limited to animals nor to living beings; nor are they limited to general terms such as nature or the animal and their philosophical and rhetorical function. Rather, Derrida is also concerned – directly or indirectly – with our responsibilities towards non-human beings in their singularity (hence the worry about rushing towards assimilating identities in the previous quote). What I am thus going to focus on in the next subchapter are indications in Derrida's texts that these ethico-political concerns go beyond concern for animals and the category of the animal (on which Derrida, at least in certain regards, took a quite strong stance). 58

Deconstructive Ecology: Non-human Beings in their Singularity

Now, a first, rather unique, indication of this broader concern for the non-human can be found more than three decades after Derrida's solicitation of the nature/culture distinction in *Of Grammatology, Margins of Philosophy* and *Writing and Difference* and more than ten years after “Force of Law,” namely in the speech “Fichus.” In it, Derrida for the first

58 See in particular Derrida's appeal to the notion of genocide in *The Animal, 26* (46f.) when he describes current industrialized animal farming as well as species extinction.
(and, it seems, only) time in his writing brings together the terms “deconstructive” and “ecology.”\textsuperscript{59} According to Derrida, such a ‘deconstructive ecology’ would have to position itself between or rather over and against both “the most powerful idealist and humanist tradition of philosophy”\textsuperscript{60} as well as against fascism.\textsuperscript{61} While these remarks about ecology are again made in the context of talking about animals,\textsuperscript{62} the term ‘deconstructive ecology’\textsuperscript{63} would suggest a broader ethico-political engagement with non-humans that exceeds not just the human species, but the animal kingdom as a whole.

Indeed, in \textit{The Animal That Therefore I Am} Derrida at some point remarks that the

\textsuperscript{59} Derrida, “Fichus,” 180: “Adorno understood that this new critical – I would rather say ‘deconstructive’ – ecology had to set itself against two formidable forces, often opposed to one another, sometimes allied.” Derrida gave this speech on the occasion of receiving the Adorno price in September 2001. In it, Derrida gave an outline of seven chapters that a possible book reflecting on Adorno and his work would have. It is in describing the last chapter that Derrida uses the phrase. See also \textit{Beast and the Sovereign}, where Derrida talks about “so-called human responsibility in the field(...) of...ecology.” (I, 35(65): “donc la responsabilité dite humaine dans l'ordre de...l'écologie.”).

\textsuperscript{60} Derrida, “Fichus,” 180.

\textsuperscript{61} This refers back to Derrida, \textit{Of Spirit}, 39f.(65f.), where Derrida precisely wonders how to take a strong position against the biologism of fascism and Nazism without appeal to metaphysical and humanist concepts. This is what Heidegger failed to achieve.

\textsuperscript{62} See also ibid., 56(69).

\textsuperscript{63} In a similar indication, Derrida lists the “ethico-ecological” among the kinds of interests he takes in “the question of the ‘biodegradable’;” “I wouldn't know how to qualify or delimit my interest in the question of the 'biodegradable': scientific interest? philosophical? ethico-ecological? political? rhetorical? poetic? prag(ram)matological?” (“Biodegradables,” 814). In \textit{Beast and Sovereign} Derrida furthermore says the following: “Which reminds us of this obvious fact: the effect and repercussion of these cataclysms are also conditioned, in their breadth and their impact. by a politico-economical situation, and therefore by the power of the media, a signifying power, then, both ethological and ethical, the \textit{ethos} of ethology here making the link between the organization of the natural habitat and ethics, therefore so-called human responsibility in the fields of economics. ecology, morality. law, and politics.” (I, 37(65): “Ce qui nous rappelle cette évidence: l'effet et la répercussion de ces cataclysmes sont aussi conditionnés, dans leur ampleur et leur retentissement, par une situation politico-économique, donc par la puissance médiatique, donc signifiante, à la fois éthologique et éthique, l'\textit{ethos} de l'éthologie faisant ici le lien entre l'organisation de l'habitat naturel et l'éthique, donc la responsabilité dite humaine dans l'ordre de l'économie, de l'écologie, de la morale, du droit et de la politique.”).
“known [connue] forms of ecologism or vegetarianism,” while by themselves insufficient to seriously interrupt the violence we, humans, have unleashed in particular against animals, “are better than that to which they oppose themselves.”

Furthermore, there are also several indications that Derrida began to be increasingly concerned with non-animal life (specifically plants) qua singularities. Thus, in the interview “Paper or Me, You Know...,” Derrida seems to suggest in passing that trees, like animals and humans, can be sacrificed. They thus would be part of the structure of sacrifice that Derrida critically examines, for example, in *The Gift of Death* regarding humans and animals. This corresponds to what Derrida seems to imply – pace Heidegger – in a passage in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, namely that not only animals and humans, but also plants are in a world of sorts (which is

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64 Derrida, *The Animal*, 101(140); translation modified: “No ethical or sentimental nobility must be allowed to conceal from us that violence [against animals, T.B.], and known forms of ecologism or vegetarianism are insufficient to bring it to an end, even if they are better than what they oppose.” (“Aucune noblesse éthique ou sentimentale ne doit nous dissimuler cette violence, que les formes connues de l'écologisme ou du végétarisme ne suffisent pas à interrompre, même si elles valent mieux que ce à quoi elles s'opposent.”).

65 “Paper or Me,” 63(269): “And among the benefits of a hypothetical decline of paper, secondary or not, paradoxical or not, we should count the ‘ecological’ benefit (for instance fewer trees sacrificed to becoming paper).” (“Parmi les bénéfices d'un hypothétique reflux du papier, bénéfices secondaires ou non, paradoxaux ou non, il faudrait d'ailleurs compter le bienfait ‘écologique’ (par exemple moins d'arbres sacrifiés au devenir-papier).”). Note that it is ‘ecological’ that is put in quotation marks here, not ‘sacrifice.’ The reticence to use the word here can be traced back to the way the ecology would still not consider the singular and would in any case have to be rethought given the current threats to the very world from which ecology emerged (“Economies of the Crisis,” 70(4)). Another instance would be Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, where he draws attention to the fact that Heidegger spends rather little time on an investigation of plants: It is not quite clear where plants fit into Heidegger’s taxonomy of *Dasein-animal-stone* (II, 6(28), 10(33), 75(120), 113(171), 198(279)).

66 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 85-87(119f.) See also ibid. 71(101) where he talks about the impossibility of sacrificing all the other cats in the world by feeding just this one, which I call ‘mine.’

67 We will briefly return to Derrida's disagreement with Heidegger regarding the latter's characterization of the world as uniquely given to humans (namely in the mode of the ‘as such’) below in chapter 6.
significant because of the crucial role the notion of world plays for Derrida's ethics. He writes (and I will return to this quote below in chapter 6): “For no one will seriously deny the animal the possibility of inhabiting the world (even if Heidegger claims that the animal does not inhabit as man alone inhabits it), no one will deny that these living beings, that we call the beast and the sovereign, inhabit a world, what one calls the world, and in a certain sense, the same world. There is a habitat of the animal as there is a habitat of plants, as there is a habitat for every living being.” And although Derrida does not

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68 For example in Beast and Sovereign, Derrida indicates that ethics begins precisely in the absence of the other's world, a world that I nevertheless share with the other humans or animals even or precisely in its absence (see his three thesis on the world ibid., 8f./30f.): “[T]he world is far, the world is gone, in the absence or distance of the world, I must, I owe it to you, I owe it to myself to carry you, without world, without the foundation or grounding of anything in the world, without any foundational or fundamental meditation, one on one, like wearing mourning or bearing a child, basically where ethics begins.” (II, 105(160): “[L]e monde est au loin, le monde est parti, dans l'absence ou l'éloignement du monde, je dois, je te dois, je me dois de te porter, sans monde, sans la fondation ou l'assise de rien au monde, sans médiation fondatrice ou fondamentale, seul à seul, comme qui porte de deuil et qui porte l'enfant, là où commence en somme l’éthique”). See also “Rams,” 160(73f.): “There is no longer any world, it’s the end of the world, for the other at his death. And so I welcome in me this end of the world, I must carry the other and his world, the world in me: introjection, interiorization of remembrance (Erinnerung), and idealization. Melancholy welcomes the failure and the pathology of this mourning. But if I must (and this is ethics itself) carry the other in me in order to be faithful to him, in order to respect his singular alterity, a certain melancholy must still protest against normal mourning.” (“Il n'y a plus de monde, c'est la fin du monde pour l'autre à sa mort, et j'accueille en moi cette fin du monde, je dois porter l'autre et son monde, le monde en moi: introjection, intériorisation du souvenir (Erinnerung), idéalisation. La mélancolie accueillait l'échec et la pathologie de ce deuil. Mais si je dois (c'est l'éthique même) porter l'autre en moi pour lui être fidèle, pour en respecter l'altérité singulière, une certaine mélancolie doit protester encore contre le deuil normal.”). See also ibid. 161f.(76f.). And as Derrida says in Beast and Sovereign this melancholy and this mourning begins before the actual physical death of an other: “[M]ourning does not wait for death, it is the very essence of the experience of the other as other, of the inaccessible alterity that one can only lose in loving it – or just as much in hating it. One is always mourning for the other” (II, 168(242): “[L]e deuil n'attend pas la mort, il est l'essence même de l'expérience de l'autre comme autre, d'une altérité inaccessible et qu'on ne peut que perdre en l'aimant - ou aussi bien en la haïssant. On est toujours endeuillé d'autrui.”). We will have more to say about this absence that always characterizes the experience of the other below, and in particular in chapters 4 and 5.

69 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 264(365): “Car nul ne déniera sérieusement à l'animal la possibilité d'habiter le monde (même si un Heidegger prétend que l'animal n'habite pas comme l'homme seul habite), personne ne niera que ces vivants, que nous appelons la bête et le souverain, habitent un monde, ce qu'on appelle le monde, et d'une certaine manière, le même monde. Il y a un habitat de l'animal comme il y a un habitat des plantes, comme il y a un habitat de tout vivant.” See also Derrida, Gift of Death: “The other attributes to or recognizes in this infinite alterity of the wholly other, every other, in other words each, each one, for example each man and woman, even each living being, human or not.” (83(116); translation
provide a specific definition of habitat in relation to world, one way to understand this
reference to a habitat as the inhabiting of a world here is that a habitat designates the
space that we share with those beings that are in a sense in the world or inhabit it, but
which do not necessarily have a world in Heidegger's sense, i.e. which do not have access
to the ‘as such’ of the world.\textsuperscript{70} Given that Derrida wonders whether humans actually have
a world in the form of accessing it ‘as such,’ the term habitat might be seen as a tentative
step towards thinking a world that we share and also do not share not just with humans,
but with all living (and possibly also non-living) beings – something we will return to in
chapter 6 of this dissertation.

Indeed, in his most famous and extensive engagement with animals, \textit{The Animal
that therefore I am}, what Derrida describes under the heading of “animals” at times
sounds as if it would include at least all living creatures (including plants) and maybe
more. He writes “[b]eyond the edge of the so-called human...there is already a
heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or precisely...a multiplicity of organizations of
relations between living and dead, relations of organization or lack of organization among
realms that are more and more difficult to dissociate by means of the figures of the
organic and inorganic, of life and/or death.”\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{70} Derrida, \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, II, 264(364f.). See below chapter 6, FN 44.

\textsuperscript{71} Derrida, \textit{The Animal}, 31(53). See also \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, II, 198(280): “[A]nimality in general, the
animality of the animal (in other words, the life common to plants, to beasts and to humans, and even to
gods)...” (“L’animalité en général, l’animalité de l’animal (autrement dit, la vie commune aux plantes, aux
bêtes et aux hommes, voire aux dieux).”). This corresponds to Derrida's use of the phrase “the living thing
modified. David Wills ends the sentence after “each man and woman” (“chaque homme ou femme”), while
the French continues: “L’autre partition attribue ou reconnait cette infinie altérité du tout autre à tout autre:
autrement dit à chacun, à chaque un, par exemple à chaque homme ou femme, voire à chaque vivant,
humain ou non.”).
As might become apparent in this quote, Derrida does not draw the line at the living either. In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, as we will discuss in detail in chapter 5, Derrida spends quite some time on the way that a human corpse can be experienced as other, i.e. as not simply a thing. In *Demeure* and *Rogues*, Derrida also explicitly mentions the animal corpse. He ends a chapter in *Rogues* where he discusses Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Experience of Freedom*, by wondering just how far the “each ‘one’ [chacun]” of democracy (everyone [chacun] needs to be considered equally) extends: “To the dead, to animals, to trees and rocks?”

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72 See below chapter 5.

73 In “Demeure” Derrida writes after quoting Blanchot (“Even the bloated horses, on the road, in the fields, attested to a war that had gone on. [My emphasis]”): “The verb ‘attested,’ which I underline, is the only word that explicitly signals the testimonial dimension of the narrative. It is employed, furthermore, in a diverted and derivative sense: a thing or an animal, a fortiori, a body could never arrest to anything, even if it does attest, in the loose sense of being a clue or evidence. In the humanist logic of what we call testimony in our European culture, a horse does not testify. Nor does a body. The death of a horse does not testify to the fact that there has been war unless one is using the word attest in a rather vague sense, in the sense of an exhibit, of a document or an archive.” (80f. (105f.): “Le verbe ‘attestaient,’ je le souligne, est le seul mot qui fasse un signe explicite vers la dimension testimoniale du récit. Il se trouve en fait utilisé en un sens détourné ou dérivé: une chose ou un animal, a fortiori un cadavre ne sauraient jamais attester quoi que ce soit, même s’ils attestent au sens lâche de l’indice ou de la preuve. Dans la logique humaniste de ce que nous appelons dans notre culture européenne le témoignage, un cheval ne témoigne pas. Ni un cadavre. La mort d’un cheval ne témoigne pas du fait qu’il y a eu une guerre sauf si on utilise le mot attester en un sens vague, celui de la pièce à conviction, du document ou de l’archive.”). It is this humanist logic that Derrida has persistently undermined.

74 Derrida, *Rogues*, 54(82). See see also Ibid. 86(126); translation modified (Naas and Brault translate ‘milliards de mortels’ as ‘millions of human beings’): “The expression ‘democracy to come’ does indeed translate or call for a militant and interminable political critique. A weapon aimed at the enemies of democracy, it protests against all naïveté and every political abuse, every rhetoric that would present as a present or existing democracy, as a de facto democracy, what remains inadequate to the democratic demand, whether nearby or far away, at home or somewhere else in the world, anywhere that a discourse on human rights and on democracy remains little more than an obscene alibi so long as it tolerates the terrible plight of so many billions of mortals suffering from malnutrition, disease, and humiliation, grossly deprived not only of bread and water but of equality or freedom, dispossessed of the rights of all, of everyone, of anyone. (This ‘anyone’ comes before any other metaphysical determination as subject, human person, or consciousness, before any juridical determination as compere, compatriot, kin, brother, neighbor, fellow religious follower, or fellow citizen. Paulhan says somewhere, and I am here paraphrasing, that to think
Indeed, the problem of plants and rocks was introduced as early as 1989 in “Force of Law,” one of the first texts by Derrida that explicitly deals with problems of ethics and politics. In it, Derrida, after pointing to the injustice consisting in an unequal participation in or capacity for a given idiom – for example the language in which a trial is conducted –, draws attention to the fact that in the traditional conception of justice, which he sets out to problematize in this text as well as others, this injustice of the idiom can only be done to those who are in principle capable of language. However, language (within these traditional axioms) would only signify human language, or more precisely (following the historical record in what we call the West) “adult white male Europeans, carnivorous and capable of sacrifice.”

This limitation of justice to the capacity for language and of this capacity to (certain) humans (which Derrida criticized for example in The Animal that therefore I am or The Beast and the Sovereign, but also, as we saw above and given the connection between language, trace and symbolism, as early as “Freud and the Scene of democracy is to think the ‘first to happen by’ [Je premier venu]: anyone, no matter who, at the permeable limit between ‘who’ and ‘what,’ the living being, the cadaver, and the ghost. The first to happen by: is that not the best way to translate ‘the first to come’?” (“L’expression ‘démocratie à venir’ traduit certes ou appelle une critique politique militante et sans fin. Arme de combat contre les ennemis de la démocratie, elle proteste contre toute naïveté et tout abus politique, toute rhétorique qui présenterait comme démocratie présente ou existante, comme démocratie de fait, ce qui reste inadéquat à l’exigence démocratique, près ou loin, chez soi ou dans le monde, partout où les discours sur les droits de l’homme et sur la démocratie restent d’obscènes alibis quand ils s’accommodent de la misère elfroyable de milliards de mortels abandonnés à la malnutrition, à la maladie et à l’humiliation, massivement privés non seulement d’eau et de pain mais d’égalité ou de liberté, dépossédés des droits de chacun, de quiconque (avant toute autre détermination métaphysique du ‘quiconque’ en sujet, personne humaine, conscience, avant toute détermination juridique en semblable, en compatriote, congénère, frère, prochain, coreligionnaire ou concitoyen). Paulhan dit quelque part, je le transcris à ma manière, que penser la démocratie, c’est penser ‘le premier venu’ : quiconque, n’importe qui, à la limite d’ailleurs perméable entre le ‘qui’ et le ‘quoi’, le vivant, le cadavre et le fantôme). Le premier venu, n’est-ce pas la meilleure façon de traduire ‘le premier à venir’?”).

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75 For example Faith and Knowledge or Specters of Marx.

Writing”) indicates that “[i]n the space in which I am situating these remarks or reconstituting this discourse one would not speak of injustice or violence toward an animal, even less toward a vegetable or a stone. An animal can be made to suffer, but one would never say, in a sense said to be proper, that it is a wronged subject, the victim of a crime, of a murder, of a rape or a theft, of a perjury – and this is true a fortiori, one thinks, for what one calls vegetable or mineral or intermediate species like the sponge.”

The fact that Derrida inserts the cautionary phrase “one thinks” (or ‘we think:’ pense-t-on) here and that he, in this text, questions the boundaries of a conception of justice that is limited to human beings indicates that mineral beings might not be straightforwardly outside the purview of justice, i.e. of incalculable justice as that which precedes and exceeds justice as law [droit].

In a similar vein, in the interview “Eating Well,” Derrida furthermore seems to suggest that the non-living can also exist in a kind of self-relation and that the term

77 Ibid. 246(41f.): “Dans l'espace où je situe ces propos ou reconstitue ce discours, on ne parlera pas d'injustice ou de violence à l'égard d'un animal, encore moins d'un végétal ou d'une pierre. On peut faire souffrir un animal, on ne dira jamais, au sens dit propre, qu'il est un sujet lésé, la victime d'un crime, d'un meurtre, d'un viol ou d'un vol, d'un parjure, – et c'est vrai a fortiori, pense-t-on, pour ce qu'on appelle le végétal ou le minéral ou les espaces intermédiaires comme l'éponge.”

78 As mentioned before, Derrida's work in this regard mainly concerns animals. Thus, in “Force of Law” Derrida writes shortly after describing the limitations of our current conception of justice that “[i]f we wish to speak of injustice, of violence or of a lack of respect toward what we still so confusedly call the animal…one must [il faut] reconsider in its totality the metaphysico-anthropocentric axiomatic that dominates, in the West, the thought of the just and the unjust.” (247(43): “Si on veut parler d'injustice, de violence ou d'irrespect envers ce que nous appelons encore si confusément l'animal…il faut reconsidérer la totalité de l'axiomatique métaphysico-anthropocentrique qui domine en Occident la pensée du juste et de l'injuste.”). This challenge casts a light back on Derrida's previous description of the limits of our traditional conception of justice. Insofar as this conception that excludes certain humans, animals, plants and minerals can be challenged with regard to animals, it at least seems possible that such a challenge is also plausible with regard to the exclusion of plants and minerals. In any case, Derrida never indicates – at least not to my knowledge – that such a reworking of justice and ethics would be impossible or unethical. If Derrida indeed wanted to suggest that we should draw a line at animals or the living, it seems odd that he would mention the stone at all.
‘animal’ is indeed also a shorthand for that which can be extended – with the proper attention to salient differences – to all sorts of non-human beings. To Nancy’s question “When you decide not to limit a potential ‘subjectivity’ to man, why do you then limit yourself simply to the animal?,” Derrida responds: “Nothing should be excluded. I said ‘animal’ for the sake of convenience and to use a reference that is as classical as it is dogmatic. The difference between ‘animal’ and ‘vegetal’ also remains problematic. Of course the relation to self in ex-appropriation is radically different (and that's why it requires a thinking of difference and not of opposition) in the case of what one calls the ‘nonliving,’ the ‘vegetal,’ the ‘animal,’ ‘man,’ or ‘God.’ The question also comes back to the difference between the living and the nonliving.”

This non-exclusive engagement with the non-living also corresponds to his frequent questioning of the strict distinction between who and what – a questioning,

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80 Derrida, Rogues, 86(126). See above FN 74. See also “To Forgive,” where Derrida writes that we will have “to suspect or suspend the meaning of this opposition…, a little…as if, perhaps, the impossibility of a true, appropriate, appropriable experience of ‘forgiveness’ signified the dismissal of this opposition between ‘who’ and ‘what,’ its dismissal and thus its history, its passed historicity.” (24(16); “à suspendre le sens de cette opposition…, un peu comme si…, peut-être, l'impossibilité d'une véritable expérience appropriée, appropriable du “pardon” signifiait à cette opposition entre le ‘qui’ et le ‘quoi’ son congé, son congé et donc son histoire, son historicité passée.”). See also On Touching, where Derrida brings up this question in particular with regard to nature and its other(s): “And that is enough to discredit every opposition fundamentally: nature/culture, nature/mind or consciousness, physis/nomos, thesis or techne, animality/humanity, and so forth. Now in this regard it is no longer possible to ask the question of touch in general, regarding some essence of touch in general, before determining the ‘who’ or the ‘what,’ the touching or touched, which we shall not too hastily call the subject or object of an act.” (68f./84: “Ce qui suffir à discréditer en son fond toute opposition nature/culture, nature/esprit ou conscience, physis/nomos, thesis ou tekhnè, animalité/humanité, etc. Or, à cet égard, il n'est plus possible de poser la question du toucher en général, de quelque essence du toucher en général avant de déterminer le ‘qui’ ou le ‘quoi’, le
which in the *Death Penalty* seminars leads him to say the following that seems to take us even beyond the natural: “We are taking seriously here all that is condemned, whether it be a life or a door or a window – or whatever or whoever it may be whose end would be promised, announced, prognosticated, decreed, signed like a verdict.”

Finally, Derrida, even though he usually talks about the ‘world’ (*monde*) rather than the ‘earth’ (*terre*), does seem to suggest the possibility of a kind of ‘earth democracy’ to come in the 1993 (published in 1994) interview “Nietzsche and The Machine.” He says the following – and this is again something we will return to below in chapter 6:

What I am calling a new *International* both signals the need to radicalize the critique of law, of the state and the nation, and bears witness to an international which carries the promise of itself, which is hearing the promise of a ‘democracy

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81 *Death Penalty*, I, 282(380): “Nous prenons ici au sérieux tout ce qui est condamné, que ce soit une vie ou que ce soit une porte ou une fenêtre - ou quoi ou qui que ce soit dont la fin serait promise, annoncée, pronostiquée, édictée, signée comme un verdict.” As it says in the translator’s note, Derrida draws here on the double meaning of *condamné*: “In French, a door or window that is boarded up or filled in is said to have been condemned.” (ibid., FN 18). Similarly, in English, an old building can be said to be condemned.

82 One reason for this might have been the worry that earth would be construed as an absolute reference or a transcendental signifier (see below chapter 6, FN 45) For some further exceptions to this preference of world over earth see *Aporias*, 21(47f): “A subquestion to this limitless question would concern what affects these topographical or topological conditions when the speed of the panopticization of the earth – seen, inspected, surveyed, and transported by satellite images – even affects time, nearly annuls it, and indeed affects the space of passage between certain borders (this is one example among others of various so-called technical mutations that raise the same type of question).” (“Une sous-question de cette question sans limite concernerait ce qui affecte lesdites conditions topographiques ou topologiques quand la vitesse de la panoptisation de la terre – vue, inspectée, surveillée et transportée par images de satellite – affecte même, tout près de l'annuler, le temps, voire l'espace du passage entre des frontières (exemple parmi d'autres de tant d'autres mutations dites techniques et qui soulèvent le même type de questions).”). See also *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 10(33) and 364(365).
to come,' linking singularities beyond the structures of the nation-state. This democracy is not an abstract utopia. I believe this solidarity, this bond to be what is provoking the gradual and necessary transformation of international law; it renders account of the sense of dissatisfaction we all have toward present events in the world. If no one is happy with the present state of the world, it is because nothing is satisfactory: neither the state, nor the nation-state, nor international law, nor the world ‘order’; and because this dissatisfaction derives in the last instance from a ‘bond’ that demands thought and negotiation. Since this bond between singularities, as well as the promise it carries, is what I call spectral, it cannot be made into a community; the promise of the bond forms neither a national, linguistic, or cultural community, nor does it anticipate a cosmopolitan constitution. It exceeds all cultures, all languages, it even exceeds the concept of humanity. A final point: our dissatisfaction requires, at the same time, in the same gesture of thought, rethinking the limits between the human and the animal, the human and the natural, the human and the technical. *For the question of animality, that of the earth, of what we may mean by 'life' in general also makes up the promise of this bond.*”

This relates to another passage (that we will also return to in the last chapter) in Derrida's untranslated foreword “Avances” to Serge Margel's *Le tombeau du Dieu Artisan,* where he writes the following:

We are dealing here with a responsibility – taken in the name of another, as always – with ours as that of another, with a human responsibility which, in short, charges itself with the survival of the cosmos or in any case of our world. Is there a more ‘current’ [actuel] problem? More current, that is to say more present, more urgent, but also more pressing and more acute in a new form of the question ‘what is to be done?’ What will we do, what shall we make of [or do with: faire de, T.B.] the earth, and of the human earth?”

What should have become apparent in this section, then, is that while Derrida never took an explicit stance within or with regard to contemporary environmental ethics,

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83 Derrida, “Nietzsche and The Machine,” 241; second and last emphasis mine.

84 Derrida, “Avances,” 27; translation mine: “Il s’agit là d’une responsabilité – prise au nom d’un autre, comme toujours – de la nôtre comme celle d’un autre, d’une responsabilité humaine qui se charge en somme de la survie du cosmos ou en tout cas de notre monde. Est-il problème plus ‘actuel’? Plus actuel, c’est-à-dire plus présent, plus urgent mais aussi plus pressant et plus aigu dans une nouvelle forme de la question ‘que faire’? Qu’allons-nous faire, que devons-nous faire de la terre, et de la terre humaine?”
there is a significant amount of passages throughout his work that hint at the possibility for a dialogue between Derrida and certain forms of environmental philosophy. I will now turn to the question of Derrida's ethics.
CHAPTER 2
DERRIDA'S ETHICS OF UNLIMITABLE RESPONSIBILITY

What I argue in this and the following chapter is that the repeated recurrences of non-humans in ethical or proto-ethical contexts that we discussed in the previous chapter can be understood in direct correspondence to Derrida’s rethinking of ethics (along the non-moral lines already outlined above). Derrida's conception of ethical responsibility that I will develop in this chapter (and that I will link to his notion of différance and the originary performative in the next chapter) is, I submit, relevant concerning the question of the moral standing of non-human beings in at least three ways.

First, Derrida's reconceptualization of responsibility opens the way to think responsibility not just for non-human living beings, but also of (at least some) non-human living beings.¹ In other words, it allows us to understand not just human, but also certain non-human animals as responsible agents. Second, Derrida's conception of ethics, due to its aporetic attention to both general (inherited) categories and the singularity of others, makes any conclusive exclusion of any specific kind of (non-human) entity impossible. Third, Derrida's aporetic rethinking of freedom, decision, response and sovereignty as also forms of dis-ability and as rooted in a lack of power provides us a concrete way to

¹ Derrida, “Responsibility,” 67f.(178); see below FN 184.
understand ethics as not merely a one-sided relationship between human subject and non-human object. Rather, it allows us to think of ethics as rooted in a being affected that permanently escapes full rational comprehension and control.

Although the three points are related, I will focus on the latter two, i.e. on the possible extension of moral patiency (rather than of moral agency), and on Derrida's challenge to a merely passive characterization of the so-called moral patient as well as a merely active characterization of the so-called moral agent. These two points are in fact related insofar as ethical responsibility cannot be limited precisely insofar as it is rooted in a being-affected by another that exceeds our control and knowledge. This inconclusiveness of ethical responsibility (which will be further supported in chapter 3 in particular with reference to différance), will, as we already indicated in chapter 1, be supplemented in chapter 4 to 6 with three interrelated conceptual structures, namely the presence/absence of the trace, living death and world/habitat. These structures might allow us to understand the possibility of ethical (but also social) relationships with non-human beings, and in particular with inanimate non-human entities (such as landscapes, mountains, rocks or rivers).

The basic claim I want to defend in the current chapter with regard to Derrida's work on ethics is that Derrida shows that ethical responsibility arises from a space of undecidability that is characteristic of experience in general. This is insofar as the latter is structured by a necessary, but irresolvable concurrence of repeatability (or generality) and singularity. It is the aspect of singularity that involves a necessary engagement with the world that lies at the root of the experience of responsibility.
We would be called to be responsible precisely because this irresolvable conflict between the repeatable and the singular cannot be *resolved*, but only *decided* without any ultimate assurance. This lack of ultimate assurance also means that we cannot conclusively justify any position that would hold that only the experiences of certain kinds of entities have ethical significance (significance in the sense that we are responsible for the other in question or epistemically responsible for the way we frame his or her existence).

Specifically, ethical responsibility cannot be reduced to the experience of humans or even of living beings. To be sure, Derrida's resistance to any conclusive limitation of responsibility exists alongside his insistence that conceptual limitations and exclusions are unavoidable in our ethical lives. However, their *general* necessity should not be confused with the necessity and legitimacy of any *particular* set of concepts and categories – such as those that support the current structure of what Derrida at some point calls “carno-phallogocentrism.” Furthermore, the necessity to (explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously) accept, inherit, rely on and take responsibility for certain categorizations in a certain context and for a certain time can be distinguished from the claim that certain categories are permanently valid in all contexts, contexts which then could be described according to certain abstract rules. As regards animals, for instance, it is the claim of permanent, unambiguous and absolute superiority of those we call human.

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2 Derrida, “Eating Well,” 280(294). This would be a formation of thought that is carno-centric (i.e. carnivore in the literal and metaphorical sense and exclusive of animals and animality), phallo-centric (i.e. organized around a certain worship of power, presence and masculinity to the exclusion of the female, the absent and powerlessness) and logo-centric (i.e. focus on the presumed presence of speech over the absence that characterizes writing and privileging (Western) reason and language over other human and non-human faculties and features such as embodiment, emotions, dependency, non-knowledge etc.)
over those we call animal that is philosophically and ethically untenable for Derrida.³

More generally, Derrida’s work can be seen as allowing a concrete historically situated intervention into those discourses and patterns of thought that aim to conclusively establish the ethical exclusion or universal inferiority of non-humans (or certain non-humans and, at times, certain kinds of humans).

The Structure of Ethics as the Structure of Experience

I now turn to Derrida’s conception of ethics. What I aim to understand here is that and how exactly Derrida establishes the impossibility to conclusively exclude anything or anyone from the purview of ethical responsibility. This impossibility can be understood based on the need to engage even with what for now, from within our current context, appears as monstrously other. In his last seminar, The Beast and the Sovereign, which will be particularly important in the last two chapters 5 and 6, Derrida indicates unrecognizable alterity as one of the necessary conditions for ethical engagement: “So long as there is recognizability, and that which is similar and of my kind [du semblable], ethics is dormant. It is sleeping a dogmatic slumber. So long as it remains human, among humans [hommes], ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic, and not yet thinking. Not even thinking the human that it talks so much about.”⁴

I will begin to develop an understanding of this extensive conception of ethics by pointing to a curious parallel between ethics and experience and argue that this parallel

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⁴ Beast and Sovereign, I, 108(155); translation modified (The standard translation just translates semblable as ‘fellow.’): “Tant qu’il y a du reconnaissable, et du semblable, l’éthique sommeille. Elle dort d’un sommeil dogmatique. Tant qu’elle reste humaine, entre hommes, l’éthique reste dogmatique, narcissique et ne pense pas encore. Pas même l’homme dont elle parle tant.”
should in fact be understood as indicating an intertwinement of these two aspects of human existence. The parallel we can find between some of Derrida's characterizations of ethics and those of experience consists in the fact that both, according to Derrida, begin with alterity and have an aporetic structure. After pointing this out, I will briefly indicate that the alterity at play in ethics and the one at play in the constitution of experience cannot be meaningfully distinguished, thus pointing to an intertwinement rather than a mere parallel. This will be important later when we aim to understand the exact nature of our relationships of responsibility towards non-humans. These relationships, I argue, must be understood in relation to Derrida's conception of the experiencing subject as always in a relation of responsibility to what it experiences. Thus, responsibility can be located at the level of our self-constitution in relation to a world.

We will return to the inextricable link between our relationships to the world qua responsible beings and our relationships to the world qua experiencing and cognizing beings in chapter 3. However, what we will have to understand before considering the infra-structures underlying the intertwinement of experience and ethics is the nature of

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5 We should not quite say that it is the same, as alterity here would precisely appear aporetically as that which exceeds any general concept understood as that which designates different entities as of the same kind. Because alterity, as we will see in further details below, designates the singular that cannot be understood through a general type, we cannot quite say that two instances of alterity are the same. Rather, they are precisely what exceeds any attempt to establish sameness. Thus, when we say that we cannot meaningfully distinguish different kinds of alterity, this is not because alterity should be understood through a universally shared features such that there would be only one kind of alterity. Rather, each instance of alterity is, in a sense, ‘one of a kind’ – but in a sense that is unrepeatable and thus not a kind at all. Each instance of alterity is, in other words, only the same in being other each time or in not being of the same. Thus, what Derrida says in the “Afterword” about difference and iterability as each being “an aconceptual concept” could be applied to alterity as well. It would be “another kind of concept, heterogeneous to the philosophical concept of the concept, a ‘concept’ that marks both the possibility and the limit of all idealization and hence of all conceptualization.” (118(213): “une autre sorte de concept, hétérogène au concept philosophique de concept, un ‘concept’ qui marque à la fois la possibilité et la limite de toute idéalisation et donc de route conceptualization.”).
Derrida's rethinking of ethics. The two crucial elements of this reconception will be, first, the need to exceed knowledge and calculation in order to be responsible (in an aporetic experience of what is other) and, second and relatedly, to think decision and response not just as abilities and forms of activity, but also as in-abilities and as necessarily also passive in the face of another that, by contrast, is not simply passive.

As I indicated above, I want to begin with a conspicuous parallel we can find in Derrida's work between his description of ethics (which, as we will see later, is above all the experience of responsibility\(^6\)), on the one hand, and experience in general, on the other hand. Both are for Derrida constituted by alterity and consequently (as we will have to show) by aporia. This parallel, I argue later, is not coincidental and is in fact better understood as an intertwinemement. It indicates both the irreducible experiential openness and auto-responsible structure of ethics as well as the irreducible structure of responsibility that constitutes the experiencing subject. I will now outline this seeming parallel as it revolves around alterity and aporia and argue that it might indicate that every experience exhibits the structure that for Derrida is the necessary and, perhaps,\(^7\) sufficient condition of ethical responsibility. In chapter 3, I will return to the intertwinemenet between ethics and experience and show how it can be understood with reference to différance and to what Derrida calls originary performativity.

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\(^6\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 108(155); see below FN 12.

\(^7\) As we will see throughout this dissertation, this 'perhaps' (*peut-être*) should be understood as a technical term that has to be thought in relation to the impossibility of certain knowledge in our relationship to undecidability and singularity. See below FN 11.
Ethics

The idea that ethics begins with alterity – and thus singularity\(^8\) – can be found in Derrida's work as early as *Of Grammatology*, published in 1967, and as late as Derrida's last seminar on *The Beast in the Sovereign*, given between 2001 and 2003.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida writes the following: “There is no ethics without the presence of the other\(^9\) but also, and consequently, without absence, dissimulation, detour, differance, writing. The arche-writing is the origin of morality as of immorality. The nonethical opening of ethics. A violent opening.”\(^{10}\) In *The Beast and the Sovereign*

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\(^{8}\) I am going to assume here that every alterity is also singular in that it exceeds the generality of concepts that would allow us to understand it as repeatable and thus familiar. Conversely, I also assume that everything that is singular is other precisely insofar as it must resist the general structures and concepts that would allow us to understand it as not-other. This connection between alterity and singularity will be crucial in the following chapters as well. For the link between the two, see Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 87(121); see below FN 72. See also Derrida, *Echographies*, 13(21). See below FN 43. For the general connection between singularity and alterity see (“Force of Law,” 256f.(60f.). See below FN 15. See also also *Gift of Death*, 68(98). See below FN 104, and “Rams,” 160(73f.). See below FN 13. See also ibid. 161f.(76f.). The close connection between alterity and singularity is also drawn in *Specters of Marx*, 33(56) and 37(60). See also below FN 43.

\(^{9}\) When reading ‘the other’ one should be careful not to hypostasize this English translation of the French term *l’autre*. *L’autre* (like the German *der/die/das Andere*) has less of a tendency than the English ‘the other’ to make the reader think of a singular Other. Instead, the other should be thought of as simply ‘that which is other.’ This could refer to all kinds of entities that are not-me or not-the-same. More precisely, ‘the other’ is a contextual and relational term. Another is always another of something (Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 158(186). See below FN 69), and it refers to a different kinds of things in different contexts – and indeed that which exceeds a specific thing or context insofar as they can be clearly identified (see below chapter 6, FN 9). As Martin Hägglund has pointed out, “[t]he other can be anything whatsoever or anyone whosoever.” (*Radical Atheism*, 31) Thus, like the general term ‘the animal’ (see Derrida, *The Animal…*, 29-31(51-53) and “Violence against animals,” 66(111), 72(121)), it refers to an irreducible plurality and each time to something singular. Hence, when reading ‘the other’ we should better or also read ‘another,’ ‘others’ or ‘that which is other.’ In order to avoid a hypostasizing reading I will for the most part use the term ‘another’ – despite the fact that ‘the other’ is most common in Derrida’s texts as well as the secondary literature.

\(^{10}\) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 140(202): “There is no ethics without the presence of the other but also, and consequently, without absence, dissimulation, detour, differance, writing. The arche-writing is the origin of morality as of immorality. The nonethical opening of ethics. A violent opening. As in the case of the vulgar concept of writing, the ethical instance of violence must be rigorously suspended in order to repeat the genealogy of morals.” (“Il n’y a pas d’éthique sans présence de l’autre mais aussi et par conséquent sans absence, dissimulation, détour, différence, écriture. L’archi-écriture est l’origine de la moralité comme de l’immoralité. Ouverture non-éthique de l’éthique. Ouverture violente. Comme on l’a fait pour le concept..."
Derrida states: “A principle of ethics or more radically of justice, in the most difficult sense which I have attempted to oppose to right, to distinguish from right, is perhaps [or more precisely: may-be, peut-être\textsuperscript{11}] the obligation that engages my responsibility with respect to the most dissimilar [du plus dissemblable, the least ‘fellow’-like, T.B.], the entirely other [or wholly other, le tout autre, T.B.], precisely the monstrously other, the unrecognizable other.”\textsuperscript{12}

While there are differences between the two statements, I want to focus on what they have in common, namely that Derrida consistently designates alterity as a constitutive element of ethics.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} As we will see in particular in chapters 5 and 6, this ‘perhaps’ is the primary mode in which we can relate to what is other as the impossible, i.e. as that which exceeds what we can determine as simply possible based on the concepts, categories and structures that constitute our worlds of meaning.

\textsuperscript{12} Derrida, \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, I, 108(155); translation modified: “Un principe d'éthique ou plus radicalement de justice, au sens le plus difficile que j'ai essayé d'opposer au ou de distinguer du droit, c'est peut-être l'obligation qui engage ma responsabilité auprès du plus dissemblable, du tout autre, justement, du monstrueusement autre, de l'autre méconnaissable.” See also \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, II, 105(160): “[L]e monde est au loin, le monde est parti, dans l'absence ou l'éloignement du monde, je dois, je te dois, je me dois de te porter, sans monde, sans la fondation ou l’assise de rien au monde, sans médiation fondateurice ou fondamentale, seul à seul, comme qui porte de deuil et qui porte l'enfant, là où commence en somme l’éthique.”). See also “Rams,” 160(73f.): “There is no longer any world, it’s the end of the world, for the other at his death. And so I welcome in me this end of the world, I must carry the other and his world, the world in me: introjection, interiorization of remembrance (Erinnerung), and idealization. Melancholy welcomes the failure and the pathology of this mourning. But if I must (and this is ethics itself) carry the other in me in order to be faithful to him, in order to respect his singular alterity, a certain melancholy must still protest against normal mourning.” (“Il n'y a
At first glance, this seems to be in tension with Derrida's frequent insistence that ethics and justice also immediately require norms, rules, knowledge and general categories. In “Force of Law,” for example, Derrida says that the freedom and the decision “of the just...must follow a law or a prescription, a rule.”

Such a requirement for a general (and thus repeatable) rule or prescription seems to be in tension with Derrida's insistence on the other in that it threatens the latter in its singularity and thus alterity. This is because, as Derrida says in “Force of Law,” the singular event of justice – i.e. “justice as the experience of absolute alterity” – “exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth.”

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14 Derrida, “Force of law,” 251(50): “One will not say of a being without freedom, or at least of one who is not free in a given act, that its decision is just or unjust. But this freedom or this decision of the just, if it is to be and to be said such, to be recognized as such, must follow a law [loi] or a prescription, a rule. In this sense, in its very autonomy, in its freedom to follow or to give itself the law [loi], it has to be capable of being of the calculable or programmable order, for example as an act of fairness [équité].” (“On ne dira pas d'un être sans liberté, ou du moins qui n'est pas libre dans tel ou tel acte, que sa décision est juste ou injuste. Mais cette liberté ou cette décision du juste doit, pour être et être dite telle, être reconnue comme telle, suivre une loi ou une prescription, une règle. En ce sens, dans son autonomie même, dans sa liberté de suivre ou de se donner la loi, elle doit pouvoir être de l'ordre du calculable ou du programmable, par exemple comme acte d'équité.”). See also “Human Genome,” 199f.(143), where Derrida says that that “the concepts of responsibility and freedom do of course call for the establishment, the institution of norms, or the reference to norms,” (“les concepts de responsabilité et de liberté en appellent, bien sûr, à l'établissement, à l'institution de normes ou à la référence à ces normes”) – even though “they also, at the same time, call for a suspensive attitude with regard to the norm and normality” (“mais en même temps à une attitude suspensive à l'égard de la norme et de la normalité.”).

15 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 256f.(60f): “Justice remains to come, it remains by coming [la justice reste à venir], it has to come [elle a à venir] it is to-come, the to-come [elle est à-venir], it deploys the very dimension of events irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this à-venir, and will always have had it. Perhaps this is why justice, insofar as it is not only a juridical or political concept, opens up to the avenir the transformation, the recasting or refounding [la refondation] of law and politics. ‘Perhaps’ – one must [il faut] always say perhaps for justice. There is an avenir for justice and there is no justice except to the
However, Derrida's addresses this tension precisely by leaving it unresolved. In order to think and experience something other as other we need to precisely think and experience this tension between that which is singularly other and that which is general and repeatable. This is because that which is other can only be experienced as other in an aporetic fashion as that which resists our experience insofar as experience is constituted through certain categories as well as (self-)consciousness – and, as we will see later, this resistance is a crucial part of experience itself. Another can thus only degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth. Justice, as the experience of absolute alterity, is unpresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history.” (“La justice reste à venir, elle a à venir, elle est à-venir, elle déploie la dimension même d'événements irréductiblement à venir. Elle l'aura toujours, cet à-venir, et elle l'aura toujours eu. Peut-être est-ce pour cela que la justice, en tant qu'elle n'est pas seulement un concept juridique ou politique, ouvre à l'avenir la transformation, la refonte ou la refondation du droit et de la politique. ‘Peut-être,’ il faut toujours dire peut-être pour la justice. Il y a un avenir pour la justice et il n'y a de justice que dans la mesure où de l'événement est possible qui, en tant qu'événement, excède le calcul, les règles, les programmes, les anticipations, etc. La justice comme expérience de l'altérité absolue, est imprésentable, mais c'est la chance de l'événement et la condition de l'histoire.”

This aporetic double necessity of theorizing and understanding (something which can only happen in general terms) that which is nevertheless singular could be one way to understand Derrida dictum that we need to think together the event and the machine, i.e. the unrepeatable, unexpectable and the repeatable and calculable. He writes in “Typewriter Ribbon:” “Will this be possible for us? Will we one day be able, and in a single gesture, to join the thinking of the event to the thinking of the machine? Will we be able to think, what is called thinking, at one and the same time, both what is happening (we call that an event) and the calculable programming of an automatic repetition (we call that a machine)? For that, it would be necessary in the future (but there will be no future except on this condition) to think both the event and the machine as two compatible or even indissociable concepts. Today they appear to us to be antinomic. Antinomic because what happens ought to keep, so we think, some nonprogrammable and therefore incalculable singularity. An event worthy of the name ought not, so we think, to give in or be reduced to repetition.” (72(34): “Cela nous sera-t-il possible? Pourrons-nous un jour, et d'un seul mouvement, ajouter une pensée de l'événement avec la pensée de la machine ? Pourrons-nous penser, ce qui s'appelle penser, d'un seul et même coup et ce qui arrive (on nomme cela un événement), et, d'autre part, la programmation calculable d'une répétition automatique (on nomme cela une machine)? Il faudrait alors dans l'avenir (mais il n'y aura d'avenir qu'à cette condition), penser et l'événement et la machine comme deux concepts compatibles, voire indissociables. Aujourd'hui ils nous paraissent antinomiques. Antinomiques, car ce qui arrive devrait garder, pense-t-on, quelque singularité non programmable, donc incalculable. Un événement digne de ce nom devrait, pense-t-on, ne pas céder ou se réduire à la répétition.”).
present itself ‘as such’17 by dissimulating itself.18 Alterity only emerges through the impossible coinciding of the singular and the general, the other and the same. This impossible coinciding does thus not so much question the priority assigned to alterity, but it is precisely the condition for any experience of another as other.19

Now, this simultaneous appearance and disappearance that constitutes alterity is one instance of what Derrida calls ‘aporia.’20 An aporia consists in the necessity to simultaneously consider two heterogeneous and irreconcilable but nevertheless co-dependent paths, aspects or orders of experience or thought such as the singular and the general or repeatable, the impossible and the possible,21 knowledge and non-knowledge22 or the decidable and the undecidable, thus creating a “contradictory double

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17 That is to say as lacking the ‘as such.’ See Derrida, Apories, 78(137): “The ultimate aporia is the impossibility of the aporia as such.” (“L’aporie ultime, c’est l’impossibilité de l’aporie comme telle.”).

18 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 47(69): “The presentation of the other as such, that is to say the dissimulation of its ‘as such,’ has always already begun and no structure of being escapes it.” (“La présentation de l’autre comme tel, c’est-à-dire la dissimulation de son ‘comme tel’, a toujours déjà commencé et aucune structure de l’étant n’y échappe.”). This general aporetic (dis)appearance of the other carries over into the ethical (which is, as we will see later, not a coincidence), as becomes clear in Gift of Death where Derrida indicates the necessity of both the oblivion as well as the return of the other. He talks about the way that sacrifice is still part of the basic structure of social life today. When talking about this structure or order that is arranged around the necessity of sacrifice, Derrida says: “That this order is founded upon a bottomless chaos (the abyss or open mouth) is something that will necessarily be brought home one day to those who just as necessarily forget the same.” (86/120: “Que cet ordre soit fondé sur le non-fondement d’un chaos (abîme et bouche ouverte), cela se rappellera nécessairement un jour à ceux qui l’oublient tout aussi nécessairement.”).

19 This is why Derrida said in the above quote on ethics from Of Grammatology that there is no ethics without “absence, dissimulation, detour, differance, writing.” (140(202); see above FN 10).

20 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 250(48); see below FN 89. See also Aporias, 16(37); see above FN 25.

21 Derrida, The Other Heading, 41(43). See below FN 25.

22 See “Hospitality,” where Derrida says that we need “to know as much as possible in order to ground our decision,” (73) while also insisting on the necessity “to go beyond knowledge” in order “for a decision to be made,” (66). See also Aporias, 19(42).
imperative.”

As will be important later, the fact that the two orders at play here are irreconcilable also means that an aporia is undecidable as regards the respective import of the two sides. This relates aporia back to alterity: The fact that it designates that which cannot be decided according to any rational rule, or to any resource we qua subjects can find and make present within ourselves marks it again as a form of alterity. Given the aporetic character of alterity and the alterity of aporia, Derrida can thus suggest, in line with the above-quoted passages about alterity as the beginning of ethics, “that ethics [or morality, T.B.], politics, and responsibility, if there are any, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia”

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23 Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 79(77); translation modified: “ce double impératif contradictoire.”

24 In other words, the relation between the decidable and the undecidable is itself undecidable. For Derrida, “the undecidable is not merely the oscillation between two significations or two contradictory and very determinate rules, each equally imperative (for example, respect for equity and universal right, but also for the always heterogeneous and unique singularity of the unsubsumable example). The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions. Undecidable – this is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule, must [dœit] nonetheless – it is of duty [devoir] that one must speak – deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules.” (“Force of Law,” 252(53); emphasis mine: “[L]’indécidable, ce n’est pas seulement l’oscillation entre deux significations ou deux règles contradictoires et très déterminées, mais également impératives (par exemple ici le respect du droit universel et de l’équité mais aussi de la singularité toujours hétérogène et unique de l’exemple non subsumable). L’indécidable n’est pas seulement l’oscillation ou la tension entre deux décisions. Indécidable est l’expérience de ce qui, étranger, hétérogène à l’ordre du calculable et de la règle, doit cependant…se livrer à la décision impossible en tenant compte du droit et de la règle.”).

25 Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 41(43): “I will even venture to say that ethics [or morality, T.B.], politics, and responsibility, if there are any, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia... The condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only possible invention, the impossible invention” (“J’oserai suggérer que la morale, la politique, la responsabilité, s’il y en a, n’auront jamais commencé qu’avec l’expérience de l’aporie... La condition de possibilité de cette chose, la responsabilité, c’est une certaine expérience de la possibilité de l’impossible : l’épreuve de l’aporie à partir de laquelle inventer la seule invention possible, l’invention impossible.”). See also Derrida, *Aporias*, 16(37); translation modified: “There [i.e. in *The Other Heading*, T.B.], at a precise moment, without giving in to any dialectic, I used the term ‘aporia’...[see p. 100, T.B.] for a single duty that recurrently duplicates itself interminably, fissures itself, and contradicts itself without remaining the same,
Now, so far we have only briefly indicated that for Derrida singularity, alterity and aporia mark the beginning of ethics. However, we have not yet shown how and why this is the case. We will return to the crucial function of alterity and aporia in more detail below when we focus on the central role that decision, response and responsibility play for Derrida's understanding of ethics.

For now, I want to briefly show that these aspects of alterity and aporia are also necessary elements of all experience. What this indicates, I suggest, is that what Derrida understands as the space of ethical obligation and responsibility is not limited to a circumscribed sphere of experience. Rather, as I will argue later, the experiencing subject must be understood as constitutively, although undecidably, responsible for whatever it experiences.

Experience

Before beginning to briefly point out the crucial role of alterity and aporia for experience, I first want to briefly address the ambiguous status that the notion of experience has in Derrida's work. Indeed, an appeal to it might be surprising given Derrida's critique of the metaphysical conception of experience for example in Of Grammatology. Such a metaphysical conception of experience would imply the conscious presence of an object that is simply given to and in principle fully accessible

that is, concerning the only and single ‘contradictory double imperative’...[see p. 79, T.B.]. I suggested that a sort of nonpassive endurance of the aporia was the condition of responsibility and of decision.” (“A propos d'un même devoir qui, de façon récurrente, interminablement, se dédouble, se fissure, se contredit sans cesser de rester le même, à savoir le seul et même “double impératif contradictoire” [see p. 77, T.B.], et cela sans céder à aucune dialectique, je me servis à un moment donné du mot d'aporie [see p. 116, T.B.] et proposai une sorte d'endurance non passive de l'aporie comme condition de la responsabilité et de la décision.”).
for a completely self-transparent subject.26 It is against the backdrop of what he takes to be this common or classical understanding of experience that Derrida writes that for example the gift and forgiveness – due to their aporetic nature – never present themselves “to what is commonly called experience.” He consequently says that the use of “the word ‘experience’ may... seem abusive or precipitous.”27 However, Derrida nevertheless does, for instance, talk about the experience of aporia, of the undecidable, of the impossible,28 or of forgiveness.29

What seems like a contradiction can be explained by Derrida's conviction that “[w]e must begin wherever we are.”30 That is, we cannot simply step out of our cultural and historical situation of inheritance (an inheritance Derrida designates alternately as metaphysics, logocentrism, phonocentrism or “carno-phallogocentrism”31). We cannot simply disown the concepts that constitute this inheritance – even if we aim to criticize and problematize them. Rather, we must employ the very concepts we aim to

26 In Of Grammatology Derrida writes that “‘[e]xperience’ has always designated the relationship with a presence, whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not.” (60(89): “‘Expérience’ a toujours désigné le rapport à une présence, que ce rapport ait ou non la forme de la conscience.”).

27 Derrida, To Forgive, 22(9); emphasis mine: “I have just said ‘experience’ of forgiveness or the gift, but the word ‘experience’ may already seem abusive or precipitous here, where forgiveness and gift have perhaps this in common, that they never present themselves as such to what is commonly called an experience, a presentation to consciousness or to existence, precisely because of the aporias that we must take into account” (“‘Expérience’ du pardon ou du don, disais-je, mais déjà le mot ‘expérience’ peut paraître abusif ou précipité. Le pardon et le don ont peut-être en commun de ne jamais se présenter comme tels à ce qu'on appelle couramment une expérience, une présentation à la conscience ou à l'existence, justement en raison même des apories que nous devrons prendre en compte...”).

28 Derrida, Resistances, 54f.(73). See below FN 36.

29 Derrida, “To Forgive,” 22(8).

30 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 162(233): “Il faut commencer quelque part où nous sommes.”

problematicize in order to think them differently. This is itself an aporetical approach to which we will return briefly below in the context of decision and responsibility. What is important for now is to point out that Derrida (aporetically) rethinks rather than eliminates the notion of experience (as he does for other traditional concepts). Indeed, when asked in 1986 how to best describe his writing over the years (whether “route, path, adventure, experience, trajectory”), Derrida responds: “I rather like the word experience whose origin evokes traversal, but a traversal with the body, it evokes a space that is not given in advance but that opens as one advances. The word experience, once dusted off and reactivated a little, so to speak, is perhaps the one I would choose.”

Already in Of Grammatology Derrida wrote that “we must, according to that sort of contortion and contention which the discourse is obliged to undergo here, exhaust the resources of the concept of experience before attaining and in order to attain, by deconstruction, its ultimate foundation. It is the only way to escape ‘empiricism’ [i.e. the idea, as Barry Stocker put it, that “what is given immediately in experience is the real or the true,” T.B.] and the ‘naïve’ critiques of experience at the same time.” Later on,

32 For two accounts of this rethinking as well as its ethical implications see Direk, “Double Logic of Experience” and Gormley, “Demands of Deconstruction.”

33 Derrida, “Narcissism,” 207(221): “J’aime assez le mot d’expérience dont l’origine dit quelque chose de la traversée; mais d’une traversée avec le corps, d’un espace qui n’est pas donné d’avance mais qui s’ouvre à mesure qu’on avance. Le mot expérience un peu réactivé, rajeuni, disons, est peut-être celui que je choisirais.”

34 Stocker, Derrida on Deconstruction, 32.

35 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 60(89): “Expérience” a toujours désigné le rapport à une présence, que ce rapport ait ou non la forme de la conscience. Nous devons toutefois, selon cette sorte de contorsion et de contention à laquelle le discours est ici obligé, épouser les ressources du concept d’expérience avant et afin de l’atteindre, par déconstruction, en son dernier fond. C’est la seule condition pour échapper à la fois à l’empirisme’ et aux critiques ‘naïves’ de l’expérience.” Despite this qualified distancing from empiricism, Derrida can nevertheless be seen as an empiricist of sorts insofar as deconstruction consists in a radical
Derrida will indicate this attempt to think experience beyond the notion of presence through aporetic formulations such as “the experience of the impossible,”36 “The experience of a wound[blessure]”37 or “the experience of cinders.”38 He indeed seems to employ the term under erasure when he writes in “How To Avoid Speaking: Denials” about “an ‘experience’ such as this one, the experience of the khora that is above all not an experience, if [and I emphasize this word, T.B.] what one understands by this word is a certain relation to presence, whether sensible or intelligible, or even a relation to the openness to what comes and what cannot be anticipated with reference to any form of rationality (Mooney, “Derrida's radical empiricism”).

36 Derrida, Resistances, 54f.(73): “There is no point in recalling here once again that deconstruction, if there is any, is not a critique, still less a theoretical or speculative operation methodically carried out by someone; rather, if there is any deconstruction, it takes place...as experience of the impossible.” (“Inutile de rappeler une fois encore que la déconstruction, s'il y en a, n'est pas une critique, encore moins une opération théorique ou spéculative méthodiquement menée par quelqu'un, mais que s'il y en a, elle a lieu...comme expérience de l'impossible.”).

37 Derrida, “Passages,” 378(392); see below FN 46.

38 Derrida, “Narcissism,” 207(221): “The experience of cinders is the experience not only of forgetting, but of the forgetting of forgetting, of the forgetting of which nothing remains. This, then, is the worst and, at the same time, it is a benediction. Both at once.” (“L'expérience de la cendre, c'est l'expérience non seulement de l'oubli, mais de l'oubli de l'oubli, de l'oubli dont il ne reste rien. Alors, c'est le pire et, en même temps, c'est une bénéédiction. Les deux à la fois.”).
presence of the present in general,” Derrida gets the notion of ‘under erasure’ from Heidegger’s erasure of the copula ‘is,’ Anderson shows how this logic of ‘under erasure’ also operates in the practical realm. She writes: “Therefore, to put metaphysical ethics, ‘under erasure’ is, to deconstruct a conception of ethics as that which provides directions for behaviours along prescriptive lines. But this is not to reject ethics as a metaphysical-philosophical discourse. Instead, it is a means of bringing to the fore the instability of such a discourse by signaling that ethics contains its own transformation. And this transformation occurs precisely because ethical ‘presence’ (the coalescing into a homogenous unity of universalization in and through ethical systems) contains the trace of absence, or another presence (alterity) within presence (within closure). Thus, not only is ethics itself as a universal metaphysical discourse always already under erasure, but…our singular responses in our everyday experiences in negotiation with social, cultural and moral norms, also places ethics, under erasure.”

Derrida then, as Peggy Kamuf puts it, “holds onto the vessel-term ‘experience’,” “but in order to let be heard the unheard-of in its legacy.” “He inherits the term and the thinking of experience just as he says one must always inherit anything: by selecting and

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39 Derrida, “Denials,” 174(176f.): “The question now becomes the following: what happens between, on the one hand, an “experience” such as this one, the experience of the khora that is above all not an experience, if what one understands by this word is a certain relation to presence, whether sensible or intelligible, or even a relation to the presence of the present in general, and, on the other hand, what one calls the via negativa in its Christian moment?” (“La question devient maintenant la suivante: que se passe-t-il entre, d'une part, une “expérience” telle que celle-ci, l'expérience de la khora qui n'est surtout pas une expérience si l'on entend par ce mot un certain rapport à de la présence, qu'elle soit sensible ou intelligible, voire à la présence du présent en général et, d'autre part, ce qu'on appelle la via negativa dans son moment chrétien?”). See also ibid., 164(167): “In the three stages that now await us, I thought it necessary to privilege the experience of place. But already the word ‘experience’ seems risky. The relation to place about which I am going to speak will perhaps no longer have the form of experience, at least if experience still assumes the encounter with or crossing of a presence.” (“Dans les trois étapes qui nous attendent maintenant, j'ai cru devoir privilégier l'expérience du lieu. Mais déjà le mot d'expérience paraît risqué. Le rapport au lieu dont nous allons parler n'aura peut-être plus la forme de l'expérience, du moins si celle-ci suppute encore la rencontre ou la traversée d'une présence.”).

40 See “Number of Yes” 236(244): “And if this is so, would it not be necessary to detach the experience and the description of the yes from those of a volo? At issue, of course, would be an experience without experience, a description without description: no determinable presence, no object, no possible theme.” (“Et s'il en était ainsi, ne faudrait-il pas soustraire l'expérience et la description du oui à celles d'un volo? Bien entendu, il s'agirait d'une expérience sans expérience, d'une description sans description : aucune présence déterminable, aucun objet, aucun théme possible.”).

41 Anderson, Ethics under Erasure. Just like Derrida gets the notion of ‘under erasure’ from Heidegger's erasure of the copula ‘is,’ Anderson shows how this logic of ‘under erasure’ also operates in the practical realm. She writes: “Therefore, to put metaphysical ethics, ‘under erasure’ is, to deconstruct a conception of ethics as that which provides directions for behaviours along prescriptive lines. But this is not to reject ethics as a metaphysical-philosophical discourse. Instead, it is a means of bringing to the fore the instability of such a discourse by signaling that ethics contains its own transformation. And this transformation occurs precisely because ethical ‘presence’ (the coalescing into a homogenous unity of universalization in and through ethical systems) contains the trace of absence, or another presence (alterity) within presence (within closure). Thus, not only is ethics itself as a universal metaphysical discourse always already under erasure, but…our singular responses in our everyday experiences in negotiation with social, cultural and moral norms, also places ethics, under erasure.”
accepting the risk of active interpretation.”

Alken, Aporia in Experience and Ethics

As regards the seeming structural parallel between experience and ethics I begin with the element of alterity, which will also lead us to the aspect of aporia. Derrida repeatedly describes experience as irreducibly characterized by the event or the arrival of the singular other. In “Typewriter Ribbon,” for example, Derrida says that the arrival of

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42 Kamuf, “To Follow,” 8: “…I would have wanted to show how Derrida holds onto the vessel-term ‘experience’ in order to fill it with what he calls the impossible, or else the ‘perhaps’ (‘this experience of the ‘perhaps’…the experience of what arrives [happens]…’ [As If 344]), or else the ‘as if’ (Papier 298), or else cinders (‘this experience of incineration which is experience itself’ [Points 209]), and the list could be extended. The constant is the word itself, which is retained but in order to let be heard the unheard-in its legacy, Derrida thereby doing what he points to above as thinking ‘on the basis of this tradition, in its name, certainly, but precisely against it in its name.’ He inherits the term and the thinking of experience just as he says one must always inherit anything: by selecting and accepting the risk of active interpretation.”

43 For the link between the event qua singularity and alterity see above FN 8. See also Derrida, Specters of Marx, 10(31): “Repetition and first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. What is a ghost? What is the effectivity or the presence of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there there, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the Singularity of any first time, makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a hauntology. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the ‘to be’)
impossible, or else the ‘perhaps’ (‘As If’ 344)). See also Echographies, 13(21): “The event cannot be reduced to the fact that something happens. It may rain tonight, it may not rain. This will not be an absolute event because I know what rain is, if in any case and insofar as I know it what it is, and, moreover, this is not an absolutely other singularity. What happens or comes to pass in this case [Ce qui arrive là] is not an arrivant.” (‘L'événement ne se réduit pas au fait que quelque chose arrive. Il peut pleuvoir ce soir, il peut ne pas pleuvoir, cela ne sera pas un événement absolu parce que je sais ce que c'est, la pluie, si du moins et dans la mesure où je le sais, et puis ce n'est pas une singularité absolument autre. Ce qui arrive là, ce n'est pas un arrivant.”).
the event is basically what experience means. He writes: “No event without experience (and this is basically what ‘experience’ means), without experience, conscious or unconscious, human or not, of what happens to the living.”

And in the interview The Deconstruction of Actuality he writes that the event “is another name for experience itself, which is always experience of the other.”

This is closely linked to Derrida’s

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44 Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon,” 72(34f.): “To respond to its name, the event ought above all to happen to someone, to some living being who is thus is affected by it, consciously or unconsciously. No event without experience (and this is basically what ‘experience’ means), without experience, conscious or unconscious, human or not, of what happens to the living.” (“Pour répondre à son nom d’événement, l’événement devrait surtout arriver à quelqu’un, en tout cas à quelque vivant qui sen trouve affecté, consciemment ou inconsciemment. Point d’événement sans expérience (et c’est au fond ce que veut dire ‘expérience’), sans expérience, conscience ou inconsciente, humaine ou non, de ce qui arrive à du vivant.”).

45 Derrida, “Deconstruction of Actuality,” 93f.(64f.) In response to the question “What does it mean, for you, to speak of the event in that connection?” (“Par rapport à ça quel sens cela a-t-il, pour vous, de parler d’événement?”), Derrida says the following: “It is another name for that which, in what arrives, one can neither reduce nor deny (or only, if you prefer, what one cannot deny). It is another name for experience itself, which is always experience of the other. The event does not let itself be subsumed under any other concept, not even that of being.” (“C’est un autre nom pour ce que, dans ce qui arrive, on n’arrive ni à réduire ni à dénier (ou seulement, si vous préférez, à dénier). C’est un autre nom pour l’expérience même qui est toujours expérience de l’autre. L’événement ne se laisse subsumer sous aucun autre concept, pas même celui d’être.”). Just before, Derrida had said the following: “So différance is a thinking that tries to respond to the imminence of what comes or will come, to the event, and therefore to experience itself, insofar as experience also inevitably tends ‘at the same time’ in view of the ‘same time’ to appropriate what arrives: the economy and aneconomy of the other, both at once. There would no différance without the urgency, the imminence, the precipitation, the inevitable, the unforeseeable coming of the other, toward whom reference and deference are directed [se portent].” (“Donc c’est une pensée, la différance, qui tente de se rendre à l’imminence de ce qui vient ou va venir, de l’événement, donc à l’expérience même, en tant que celle-ci tend aussi inévitablement, ‘en même temps’, en vue du ‘même temps’, à s’approprier ce qui arrive: économie et anéconomie de l’autre à la fois. Il n’y aurait pas de différance sans l’urgence, l’imminence, la précipitation, l’inéluctable, la venue imprévisible de l’autre vers qui se portent la référence et la déférence.”). See also “Typewriter Ribbon,” 72(34f.); see above FN 16, 44. The association of experience with alterity goes back at least as far as Of Grammatology, 165(235f.); translation modified, where Derrida writes that “auto-affection is a universal structure of experience” (“l’auto-affection est une structure universelle de l’expérience”), an auto-affection, which always means a certain loss without return or an affection by that which is other. As Derrida puts it: “Within the general structure of auto-affection, within the giving-onself-a-presence or a pleasure, the operation of touching-touched receives the other within the narrow gulf that separates doing [or acting: agir] from suffering [or undergoing: pâtir]. And the outside, the exposed surface of the body, signifies and marks forever the division that shapes [travaille] auto-affection.” (“Dans la structure générale de l’auto-affection, dans le se-donner-une-présence ou une jouissance, l’opération du touchant-touché accueille l’autre dans la mince différence qui sépare l’agir du pâtir. Et le dehors, la surface exposée du corps, signifie, marque à jamais la division qui travaille l’auto-affection.”). Indeed, this aspect of alterity in experience is one way to explain Derrida statement in Of Grammatology that the exit of or departure (sortie) from the closure of metaphysics is “radically empiricist” (162 (232): “The departure is radically empiricist.” (“La sortie est radicalement empiriste.”)).
dictum in “Passages” that “all experience is the experience of a singularity.”  

Now, insofar as alterity, as we saw above, also always appears aporetically as the simultaneous necessity of singularity and generality, of otherness and sameness, of presentation as dissimulation, it is not surprising that Derrida also sees aporia as an irreducible element of experience.

It is thus that Derrida asks in Aporias “Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?” Later in the same work Derrida seems to reply to this question in the affirmative when he says that “the affirmation” of justice and of

The reason is that this exit or the departure “proceeds in the form of a wandering thought on the possibility of itinerary and of method. It affects itself with non-knowledge as with its future and it ventures out and risks itself deliberately” (Ibid.: “Elle procède à la manière d'une pensée errante sur la possibilité de l'itinéraire et de la méthode. Elle s'affecte de non-savoir comme de son avenir et délibérément s'aventure.”).

46 Derrida, “Passages,” 378(391f.): “Wherever it happens, the date is the experience of a wound [and it ‘marks singularity,’ (377(391): ‘Une date marque la singularité’), T.B.], but this wound does not come about in some way after the experience. Given that all experience is the experience of a singularity and thus is the desire to keep this singularity as such, the ‘as such’ of the singularity, that is, what permits one to keep it as what it is, this is what effaces it right away. And this wound or this pain of the effacing in memory itself, in the gathering-up of memory, is wounding, it is a pain reawakened in itself.” (“Où qu'elle advienne, la date est l'expérience d'une blessure, mais cette blessure ne vient pas en quelque sorte après l'expérience. Toute expérience étant l'expérience d'une singularité et donc désir de garder cette singularité comme telle, le ‘comme telle’ de la singularité, c'est-à-dire ce qui permet de la garder comme ce qu'elle est, c'est ce qui l'efface aussitôt. Et cette blessure ou cette douleur de l'effacement dans la mémoire même, dans le recueillement de la mémoire, est blessant, c'est une douleur réveillée en elle-même.”).

47 Derrida, Aporias, 14f.(35): “What would such an experience be? The word also means passage, traversal, endurance, and rite of passage, but can be a traversal without line and without indivisible border. Can it ever concern, precisely (in all the domains where the questions of decision and of responsibility that concern the border – ethics, law, politics, etc. – are posed), surpassing an aporia, crossing an oppositional line or else apprehending, enduring, and putting, in a different way, the experience of the aporia to a test? And is it an issue here of an either/or? Can one speak – and if so, in what sense – of an experience of the aporia? An experience of the aporia as such? Or vice versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?” (“Que serait une telle expérience [of the aporia, T.B.]? Le mot signifie aussi passage, traversée, endurance, épreuve du franchissement, mais peut-être une traversée sans ligne et sans frontière indivisible. Peut-il jamais s'agir, justement (dans tous les domaines où se posent des questions de décision et de responsabilité quant à la frontière : éthique, droit, politique, etc.), de dépasser une aporie, de franchir une ligne oppositionnelle ou bien d'appréhender, d'endurer, de mettre autrement à l'épreuve l'expérience de l'aporie ? Et s'agit-il à cet égard d'un ou bien ou bien? Peut-on parler et en quel sens d'une expérience de l'aporie? De l'aporie comme telle? Ou inversement: une expérience est-elle possible qui ne soit pas expérience de l'aporie?”).
responsibility “that announced itself” in the “negative form” of the a-poria in fact marks “the necessity of experience itself” as “the experience of the aporia.” Indeed, alterity and aporia are not the only vantage points from which a conspicuous parallel between ethics and experience becomes apparent. In the first part of Specters of Marx (the exordium), while reflecting on the phrase “to learn [or teach: apprendre, T.B.] to live” (“apprendre à vivre”), Derrida asks: “[I]s not learning to live experience itself?” Only one paragraph later, Derrida then links the same phenomenon – learning to live – to ethics. He writes: “It is ethics itself: to learn to live – alone, from oneself, by oneself.”

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48 Ibid., 19(42): “To protect the decision or the responsibility by knowledge, by some theoretical assurance, or by the certainty of being right, of being on the side of science, of consciousness or of reason, is to transform this experience into the deployment of a program, into a technical application of a rule or a norm, or into the subsumption of a determined ‘case.’ All these are conditions that must never be abandoned, of course, but that, as such, are only the guardrail of a responsibility to whose calling they remain radically heterogeneous. The affirmation [that is the affirmation of the duty to avoid the good conscience (see ibid.), T.B.] that announced itself through a negative form [i.e. that negative form of a-poria, the non-passage or non-path, T.B.] was therefore the necessity of experience itself, the experience of the aporia (and these two words that tell of the passage and the nonpassage are thereby coupled in an aporetic fashion) as endurance or as passion, as interminable resistance or remainder.” (“Protéger la décision ou la responsabilité par un savoir, par quelque assurance théorique on par la certitude d'avoir raison, d'être du côté de la science, de la conscience ou de la raison, c'est transformer cette expérience en déploiement d'un programme, en application technique de la règle ou de la norme, en subsomption du 'cas' déterminé, autant de conditions auxquelles il ne faut jamais renoncer, certes, mais qui, en tant que telles, ne sont que les garde-fous d'une responsabilité à l'appel de laquelle ils restent radicalement hétérogènes. L'affirmation qui s'annonçait à travers la forme négative, c'était donc la nécessité de l'expérience même, l'expérience de l'aporie (et ces deux mots qui disent le passage et le non-passage s'accouplent ainsi de façon aporétique), l'expérience comme endurance ou comme passion, comme résistance ou restance interminable.”).

49 Derrida, Specters of Marx, xvii(14): “Such an address hesitates, therefore: between address as experience (is not learning to live experience itself?), address as education, and address as taming or training [dressage].” (“Telle adresse hésite alors: entre l'adresse comme expérience (apprendre à vivre, n'est-ce pas l'expérience même?), l'adresse comme éducation et l'adresse comme dressage.”).

50 Ibid., xvii(14): “It is ethics itself: to learn to live – alone, from oneself, by oneself. Life does not know how to live otherwise. And does one ever do anything else but learn to live, alone, from oneself, by oneself?” (“C'est l'éthique même: apprendre à vivre – seul, de soi-même. La vie ne sait pas vivre autrement. Et fait-on jamais autre chose qu'apprendre à vivre, seul, de soi-même ?”).
A Possible Objection: Are There Different Kinds of Alterity?

But what exactly is meant here by “the other” or alterity? Or, more specifically, can we assume that “the other” in the case of experience has the same meaning, the same intension and extension, as “the other” with which ethics begins? In order for what we called the parallel between ethics and experience to be really be a meaningful parallel (i.e. one that indicates an overlap between ethics and experience in their basic structure), what we would have to show, it seems, is that the alterity and aporia at stake when Derrida talks about experience cannot be meaningfully distinguished from the alterity and aporia of ethics.

But that might seem difficult. Insofar as not everything we experience seems to have ethical relevance, does not whatever alterity refers to in the context of experience have a broader extension (and possibly a different intension) than in the case of ethical experience? Might we not say, for example, that the other of ethics must already be a specific individualized other (say, this cat or this human being), but that the other of experience could include not just already individualized forms of alterity, but any aspect of experience including that which is just, as we might say with Kant, an unordered manifold? Experience would then be understood as fundamental receptivity towards that which is (in) the world.

I suggest that the answer to these questions must be no: While alterity (in

51 This could include entirely singular and fleeting moments or aspects of experience, features that do not seem to provide clear criteria of individuation. It would also refer to the world as a totality. Both cases would differ in important ways from the individuals we usually take as the focal points of ethical life.
Derrida’s sense) might conceivably function differently in our lives qua responsible beings than in our lives qua experiencing beings, such a difference in function cannot be derived from a difference in kind that conclusively separates one alterity from another, but could only derived from considerations and operations external to alterity.

In order to see why this is the case, we need to understand that alterity does not refer to a certain kind of thing or property, but to an operative structure, a structure discernible both in the operation of experience and of ethics insofar they involve an aporetic opening to an outside (something we will return to below). What is peculiar about this structure is that it is necessarily aporetic in that it must, in each case, involve a reference to something that, on the one hand, is singular and unrepeatable, but that, on the other hand, only becomes available to us through an appropriation that involves the repetition characteristic of general structures (such as concepts or habits).

Because of the element of singularity in what is other, i.e. because alterity does – insofar as it is other – resist any conclusive and non-arbitrary categorization according to certain repeatable concepts, we cannot use any such categorization to distinguish, say, ethically relevant alterity from that which is not relevant in this way. Such a

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52 As we will see below, responsibility is the central feature of ethics for Derrida.

53 An example would be conceptual frameworks that distinguish different occurrences of alterity according to different contexts and assign moral relevance to one set, but not to another. Thus, we might say for example that the experience of alterity in my encounter with a human being has ethical significance, while the experience of alterity in my encounter with a mountain might merely have aesthetic significance. Such frameworks, however, as we will see below, cannot assign and refuse such relevance conclusively. This is because each singular situation to which we apply such a framework cannot be fully reduced to the parameters of such a framework. Indeed, in its singularity, any encounter can affect the framework itself such that it must be adapted to a new situation it could not have anticipated in its singularity (a singularity which also would be what marks the situation as other).
categorization or division into kinds of alterity would reduce the alterity in question by making it relative to or one-sidedly dependent on a certain concept or set of concepts. Put differently, if we already knew in advance what we can experience, we would close ourselves off to the possibility of experience as radical receptivity vis-à-vis the world. Similarly, if we already knew in advance who or what can solicit our responsibility, we would (as we will see in further detail below) evade a responsible stance towards the world, i.e. one that would take seriously the need to respond to each singular situation or entity in its singularity and not just as an instance of a general category.\textsuperscript{54}

As we will see below, the question of whether the alterity of experience (we might say theoretical alterity) can be meaningfully distinguished from the alterity of ethics (we might say practical alterity) is itself an ethical question insofar as it demands a responsible engagement on our part. At the same time, it is a question of experience, i.e. of being open to a future that will inevitable put pressure on and change our ideas of the limits of responsibility.

\textit{The Aporia of Alterity That Links Ethics and Experience}

I will now show that Derrida indicates the same aporetic operation of singularity and generality for both ethics as well as experience. I will then show how this operation is exemplified and described by Derrida’s dictum that “every other is wholly other.”

As regards the context of ethics, it seems at times that the other Derrida refers to here is another who is already individualized according to certain categories. Although

\textsuperscript{54} If we would rely on certain categories without question, regardless of the circumstances, we would evade our responsibility for these categories and for the ways they are applied in always singular situations.
we might be dealing with a unique individual in these cases, such an individual is identified with reference to general categories (such as character traits, relationship categories, race, sex, species, nationality etc.). ‘This human and no other’ is also ‘this human and not this chair or this human's organ.’ We are dealing with a kind of individual that we understand through a reference to something general. Specifically, we understand it through a reference to repeatable categories that designate it as a certain kind – categories that are repeatable insofar as they can be applied to different situations and individuals.

In this case, we are not just experiencing this individual as singular (which we mark for example by giving her/him/it a name\textsuperscript{55}), but we also experience her/him/it as a token of, say, the type “human” (a type in principle repeatable in reference to other tokens). Thus, although we might have a sense of uniqueness for each and every human or animal, such an identified other would already carry an inherent relationship to categorization and thus repetition. Such categorization, in turn, would be crucial to begin an ethical engagement: It might seem that I must recognize the homeless person, the injured bird etc. as such, i.e., as belonging to the category ‘homeless person,’ ‘injured bird’ etc., in order to properly direct any potential ethical concern. Thus, Derrida, for instance in \textit{The Gift of Death}, designates the other through specific categories such as

\textsuperscript{55} And even a unique name, we might add, does only function through repetition. Such a name must be iterable, i.e. repeatedly applicable in different moments over time to what we assume to be the same individual, but whose sameness remains quite elusive once we try to pin it down. Thus, each singular act or impression we experience from a specific individual is again tied back to the identity of this individual which maintains itself over time through the repetition of what we assume to be this individual’s general characteristics.
“citizens,” “animals” “family” or “son.” Similarly, in *The Animal that therefore I am* Derrida designates the other as his cat.

However, I suggest that the experience of a particular, individualized other of a certain kind is ethical (i.e. engages our responsibility) precisely insofar as it is a site of its own excess, or insofar as this already categorized other also – aporetically – involves the experience of absolute alterity and singularity.

This becomes apparent again in *The animal that therefore I am*. When Derrida talks about the cat who is watching him, he precisely talks about her as the locus of absolute alterity. This would hold despite the fact that this being, insofar as we experience and understand it as a cat, is already understood through a repeatable category. Derrida writes about “[t]he point of view of the absolute other,” and continues saying that “nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next(-door) [voisin ou du prochain] than these moments when I see

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56 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 69(99): “But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don’t know, the billions of my fellows (without mentioning the animals that are even more other others than my fellows), my fellows who are dying of starvation or sickness. I betray my fidelity or my obligations to other citizens, to those who don’t speak my language and to whom I neither speak nor respond, to each of those who listen or read, and to whom I neither respond nor address myself in the proper manner, that is, in a singular manner (this for the so-called public space to which I sacrifice my so-called private space), thus also to those I love in private, my own, my family, my son, each of whom is the only son I sacrifice to the other, everyone being sacrificed to everyone else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day.” (“Mais je sacrifie, les trahissant à chaque instant, toutes mes autres obligations: à l’égard des autres autres que je ne connais pas ou que je connais, des milliards de mes ‘semblables’ (sans parler des animaux qui sont encore plus des autres que mes semblables) qui meurent de faim ou de maladie. Je trahis ma fidélité ou mes obligations à l’égard des autres concitoyens, à l’égard de ceux qui ne parlent pas ma langue et auxquels je ne parle ni ne réponds, à l’égard de chacun de ceux qui écoutent ou qui lisent, et à qui je ne réponds ni ne m’adresse de façon propre, c’est -à-dire singulière (ceci pour l’espace dit public auquel je sacrifie l’espace dit privé), donc aussi à l’égard de ceux que j’aime en privé, les miens, ma famille, mes fils dont chacun est le fils unique que je sacrifie à l’autre, chacun étant sacrifié à chacun sur cette terre de Moriah qui est notre habitat de tous les jours et de chaque seconde.”).

57 See chapter 1 of *The Animal.*
myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat.”

It is this cat, which is also already generalized as this cat or a cat, that gives rise to the resistant and aporetic experience of a singularity that exceeds its name, that is “resistant [rebelle] to any concept,” and to any identification as a cat or as Derrida's cat. It is as an identifiable individual, as this “cat” (one cat among others like it), that this being, this “existence” is also singularly exceeding its own identificatory determinations. And this is the case with every individualized other, i.e. with everything that can be designated as something.

This is crucial for ethics as Derrida points out for example in the context of justice in “Force of Law.” There he talks, as we already saw above, about the “experience of absolute alterity” as the singular “event [that, T.B] exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations.” It would be, as Derrida writes in Aporias, “the absolute arrivant [i.e. that

58 Ibid., 11(28): “Le point de vue de l'autre absolu, et rien ne m'aura jamais tant donné à penser cette altérité absolue du voisin ou du prochain que dans les moments où je me vois vu nu sous le regard d'un chat.”

59 Ibid., 9(26); translation modified: “If I say ‘it is a real cat’ that sees me naked, this is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity. When it responds in its name (whatever ‘respond’ means, and that will be our question), it doesn't do so as the exemplar of a species called ‘cat,’ even less so of an ‘animal’ genus or kingdom. It is true that I identify it as a male or female cat. But even before that identification, it comes to me as this irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, into this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized [rebelle à tout concept].” (“Si je dis ‘c'est un chat réel’ qui me voit nu, c'est pour marquer son irremplaçable singularité. Quand il répond à son nom (quoi que veuille dire ‘répondre,’ et ce sera donc notre question), il ne le fait pas comme le cas d'une espèce ‘chat’, encore moins d'un genre ou d'un règne ‘animal’. Il est vrai que je l'identifie comme un chat ou une chatte. Mais avant même cette identification, il vient à moi comme ce vivant irremplaçable qui entre un jour dans mon espace, en ce lieu où il a pu me rencontrer, me voir, voire me voir nu. Rien ne pourra jamais lever en moi la certitude qu'il s'agit là d'une existence rebelle à tout concept.”).

60 Ibid.

61 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 256f.(60f.); see above FN 15. On the relation between alterity and singularity see above FN 8, 43.
which happens, occurs or arrives, T.B.[][, which, T.B.] does not yet have a name or an identity."It would be a "someone else that I cannot and must not determine in advance, not as subject, self, consciousness, nor even as animal, god, or person, man or woman, living or non-living thing." Indeed, it would not even be someone, "not someone or

62 Derrida, *Aporias*, 34(67f.): “The absolute *arrivant* does not yet have a name or an identity. It is not an invader or an occupier, nor is it a colonizer, even if it can also become one. This is why I call it simply the *arrivant*, and not someone or something that arrives, a subject, a person, an individual, or a living thing, even less one of the migrants I just mentioned. It is not even a foreigner identified as a member of a foreign, determined community.” (“L'arrivant absolu n'a pas encore de nom et d'identité. Ce n'est pas un envahisseur ou un occupant, ce n'est pas un colonisateur non plus, bien qu'il puisse aussi le devenir. C'est pourquoi je l'appelle simplement l'arrivant et non quelqu'un ou quelque chose qui arrive, un sujet, une personne, un individu, un vivant, encore moins l'un de ces migrants que j'évoquais à l'instant; ce n'est même pas un étranger identifié comme membre d'une communauté étrangère déterminée.”).

63 Derrida, *Echographies*, 12(20): “In order for there to be event and history, there must be a 'come' that opens and addresses itself to someone, to someone else that I cannot and must not determine in advance, not as subject, self, consciousness, nor even as animal, god, or person, man or woman, living or non-living thing. (It must be possible to *summon* [appeler] a specter, to appeal to it [en appeler à lui], for example, and this is not just one example among others: perhaps there is something of the ghost [revenant] and of the 'come back' [reviens] at the origin or end of every 'come.' ) The one, he or she, whoever it may be, to whom it is said 'come,' should not be determined in advance. For this absolute hospitality, it is the stranger, the *arrivant*. I shouldn't ask the absolute *arrivant* to start by stating his identity, by telling me who he is, under what circumstances I am going to offer him hospitality, whether he is going to be integrated or not, whether I am going to be able to 'assimilate' him or not in my family, nation, or state. If he is an absolute *arrivant*, I shouldn't offer him any contract or impose any conditions upon him. I shouldn't, and moreover, by definition, I can't. This is why what looks like a morality of hospitality goes far beyond morality and above all beyond a right and a politics. Birth, which is similar to the thing I am trying to describe, may in fact not even be adequate to this absolute arrival [arrivance]. In families, it is prepared, conditioned, named in advance, drawn into a symbolic space which amortizes the arrival [arrivance]. And yet, despite these anticipations and pre-nominations, the element of chance [l'aléa] remains irreducible, the child who comes remains unforeseeable, it speaks, all by itself, as at the origin of another world, or at an other origin of this one.” (“Pour qu'il y ait événement et histoire, il faut donc qu'un 'viens' s'ouvre et s'adresse à quelqu'un, à quelqu'un d'autre que je ne peux ni ne dois d'avance déterminer, ni comme sujet, moi, conscience, ni même comme animal, dieu ou personne, homme ou femme, vivant ou non-vivant (on doit pouvoir *appeler* un spectre, en appeler à lui, par exemple, et je crois que ce n'est pas là un exemple parmi d'autres: il y a peut-être du revenant et du 'reviens' à l'origine ou la fin de tout 'viens'). L'un, l'une, *qui* que ce soit à qui il est dit 'viens,' ne doit pas se laisser déterminer d'avance. Pour cette hospitalité absolue, c'est l'étranger, c'est l'arrivant. Il ne faut pas que je demande à l'arrivant absolu de commencer par décliner son identité, par me dire qui il est, dans quelles conditions je vais lui offrir l'hospitalité, s'il va s'intégrer ou non, si je vais pouvoir ou non l'assimiler, dans la famille, la nation ou l'État. Si c'est un arrivant absolu, je ne dois lui proposer aucun contrat ni lui imposer aucune condition. Je ne le dois pas et d'ailleurs, par définition, je ne le peux pas. C'est pourquoi ce qui ressemble ici à une morale de l'hospitalité va bien au-delà d'une morale, et surtout d'un droit et d'une politique. La naissance, qui ressemble à ce que j'essaie de décrire, n'est peut-être, en fait, même pas adéquate à cette arrivance absolue. Dans les familles, elle est préparée, conditionnée, prénommée, prise dans un espace symbolique qui amortit l'arrivance. Il reste que, malgré ces
something that arrives, a subject, a person, an individual, or a living thing.”

However, importantly this “experience of absolute alterity” should not be limited to ethics or morality in any determinate sense. This is because I cannot “impose any condition upon (the absolute arrivant).” And “[t]his is why what looks like a morality of hospitality goes far beyond morality and above all beyond a right and a politics.”

Rather, “[i]n order for there to be event and history” at all (and, as we said above there is “[n]o event without experience”), “there must be a ‘come’ that opens and addresses itself to someone, to someone else that I cannot and must not determine in advance.” It is in this absolute receptivity without condition that something singularly other would arrive in the form of experience. At the same time, experience – like ethics – must already involve repetition and appropriation in order to work at all. The arrivant must happen or arrive to something already structured in some way, something that welcomes and registers the arrivant precisely in and through this structure as a certain thing – even though the other's arrival also changes that to which it arrives. This has been pointed out

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Derrida, Echographies, 12(20). See above FN 63.

Ibid.

Ibid. For the link between the arrivant, that which comes or arrives and the other see “Responsibility,” 67f.(178). See below FN 184.

Derrida, Aporias, 34(68): “Since the arrivant does not have any identity yet, its place of arrival is also de-identified: one does not yet know or one no longer knows which is the country, the place, the nation, the family, the language, and the home in general that welcomes the absolute arrivant.” (“Comme l'arrivant n'a pas encore d'identité, son lieu d'arrivée s'en trouve aussi désidentifié: on ne sait pas encore ou on ne sait

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anticipations et ces prénominations, l'aléa ne se laisse pas réduire, l'enfant qui arrive reste imprévisible, il parle de lui-même comme à l'origine d'un autre monde, ou à une autre origine de ce monde-ci.”).
by Derrida as early as *Violence and Metaphysics* where he holds (against early Levinas and following Husserl) that alterity cannot be or remain absolute. In order for us to relate to another (and experience is a form of relation), she/he/it cannot be absolutely other because that would mean it is unreachable by us and thus actually not other but the same insofar as it is a “totality closed in upon itself.”69 “[T]he other cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other.”70 Thus, experience is not just constituted through an openness or receptivity towards the world that precedes any anticipation of what is coming. It also must involve repeatable categories in order to identify what is thus received as something rather than nothing.

This returns us again to the aporia (between the singular and the general) at work in both ethics and experience. We need both sides in their aporetic relation in order for either to work. Alterity can only be understood in the aporetic resistance that the singular offers to the general through which it emerges, but which it must nevertheless exceed in order to emerge.

69 Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 158(185f.): “It would mean that the expression ‘infinitely other’ or ‘absolutely other’ cannot be stated and thought simultaneously; that the other cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other; and that, consequently, the same is not a totality closed in upon itself, an identity playing with itself, having only the appearance of alterity, in what Levinas calls economy, work, and history.” (“Il signifierait que l'expression 'infiniment autre' ou 'absolument autre' ne peut pas à la fois être dite et pensée; que l'Autre ne peut pas être absolument extérieur au même sans cesser d'être autre, et que par suite, le même n'est pas une totalité close sur soi, une identité jouant avec soi, avec la seule apparence de l'altérité, dans ce que Levinas appelle l'économie, le travail, l'histoire.”). Thus, “the other is always relative…” (Ibid., 158(186): “[L']autre est toujours relatif.”).

70 Ibid. See also Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 115(184), where Derrida writes: “The entirely other announces itself in the most rigorous repetition.” (“Le tout autre s'annonce dans la répétition la plus rigoureuse.”).
This link between absolute alterity and singularity, on the one hand, and the repeatable and general categories we need in order to identify any individualized other, on the other hand, is maybe most succinctly expressed by Derrida in *The Gift of Death* where he claims that everyone, every individualized other, is absolutely other (i.e. resistant to the very categories that define and delimit her/his/its individuality). He writes: “Every other (in the sense of every other) is wholly other (absolutely other)” [*Tout autre (au sens de chaque autre) est tout autre (absolument autre).*] Each and every other, i.e. the other in general, is, in other words, “infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my ego.”

Indeed, for Derrida the French phrase “Tout autre est tout autre.” (translatable as ‘Every other is every other,’ ‘Wholly other is wholly other,’ ‘Every other is wholly other,’ or ‘Each other is every other.’) expresses the necessary and aporetic link between universality and singularity in the individualized other. It means, on the one hand, “Everything (or everyone: tout) is a singularity,” i.e. every identifiable individualized

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71 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 78(110): “And since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my *ego* (as Husserl would say of the *alter ego* that can never be originally present to my consciousness and that I can apprehend only through what he calls *appresenatation* and analogy), then what can be said about Abraham’s relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to *every other* (one) as *every (bit) other* [*tout autre comme tout autre*], in particular my relation to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh. Every other (in the sense of each other) is every bit other (absolutely other).” (“Et comme chacun de nous, chaque autre, tout autre est infiniment autre dans sa singularité absolue, inaccessible, solitaire, transcendant, non manifeste, non présente originairement à mon *ego* (comme dirait Husserl de l’*alter ego* qui ne se présente jamais originairement à ma conscience et que je ne peux appréhender que de façon apprésentative et analogique), ce qui se dit du rapport d’Abraham à Dieu se dit de mon rapport sans rapport à *tout autre comme tout autre*, en particulier à mon prochain ou aux miens qui me sont aussi inaccessibles, secrets et transcendants que Iahvé. Tout autre (au sens de chaque autre) est tout autre (absolument autre).”.)
entity is also singular and resistant to categorization. On the other hand, it also implies
that “everything (or everyone: tout) is each one,”\textsuperscript{72} [tout est chacun] i.e. that each
individualized other is like others [“every other as every other”: “tout autre comme tout autre”],
that she/he/it is part of a group, a community of the world (something we will
return to in chapter 6) or is (just) like everyone\textsuperscript{73} and thus not entirely singular. And they
are like everyone, on the one hand, in their singularity, i.e. in the way they escape simple
repetition in our experience of another, but also in the way they are themselves affected
by something other that escapes the repeatability that constitutes them as an identifiable
other.\textsuperscript{74} On the other hand, everyone is like everyone, because every one (qua one or self-
identical and identifiable entity), must constitute themselves through repetition, even if it

\textsuperscript{72} Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, 87(121); translation modified. Wills translates “tout,” less radically as “everyone”
rather than “everything.” This can be justified by reference to Derrida's use of the phrase ‘n'importe qui’
(whoever) rather than ‘n'importe quoi.’ (whatever). However, given Derrida's frequent reference to corpses
and his statement in \textit{Rogues} (54(82). See above chapter 1, FN 74), Derrida seems to indeed suggest that
there is no limit to who can be considered (see also Hägglund, 88). Wills also leaves out the last part of the
sentence in parenthesis: “of the ‘whoever’” (celle du n'importe qui): “Linking alterity to singularity or to
what one could call the universal exception or the law of the exception (“tout autre est tout autre signifies
that every other is singular, that everything [tout] is a singularity, which also means that everything [tout] is
each one, a proposition that seals the contract between universality and the exception of singularity, of the
‘whoever’ [n'importe qui]), this play of words seems to contain the very possibility of a secret that hides
and reveals itself at the same time within a single sentence and, more than that, within a single language.”
(“Nouant l'altérité à la singularité ou à ce qu'on pourrait appeler l'exception universelle, la règle de
l'exception (‘tout autre est tout autre’ signifie que ‘tout autre est singulier,’ que tout est singularité, donc
aussi que tout est chacun, proposition qui scelle le contrat entre l'universalité et l'exception de la singularité,
celle du 'n'importe qui’) ce jeu de la phrase parait abriter la possibilité même d'un secret qui se dévoile et se
cache en même temps dans une seule phrase et surtout dans une seule langue.”).

\textsuperscript{73} “Chacun” can be translated either as “everyone” or “each (of a certain group).”

\textsuperscript{74} Derrida talks about the latter aspect of being affected by something unrepeatable for example in “Archive
Fever,” 50(123) where he, right after stating that “…tout autre est tout autre,” (translated here by Eric
Prenowitz as “…every other is every other other, is altogether other”) says that the violence of self-
constitution through repetition that derives from the exclusion of others who, at the same time, cannot
remain excluded, “can affect everyone, everyone and anyone, whoever” (“peut affecter chacun, tout un
chacun, quiconque.”). This would this be a “‘One differing, deferring from itself.’ The One as the Other”
(51(125): “Un de soi-même différant.’ L'Un comme l'Autre.’). We will return to this question of violence
as undecidably between oneself and another below in chapter 3.
might be an “impure” repetition. As soon as there is someone or something that is one thing and not another, repetition becomes necessary – while at the same time the imperfection of this repetition introduces the other. Finally, we can also see the aporetic conjunction between singularity and repetition, at work in the seeming tautology of the French phrase itself: Tout autre est tout autre. This is because it does not simply refer to the tout autre, but enacts a repetition characterized by différance (namely the operation of iterability). It thus enacts the emergence of an alterity that breaks with every complete repeatability, and that thus marks itself as wholly or completely other (tout autre). The repetition of the designation ‘tout autre’ (‘Tout autre is tout autre is tout autre etc.’),

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75 Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 51, FN 15(125, FN 2); see below FN 80.
76 Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 51(124-26); see below chapter 3, FN 67.
77 Iterability refers to the way that identity (of any material or ideal entity) only constitutes itself through repetition, while each repetition is necessary imperfect (insofar as it repeats itself in always different contexts). It thus also indicates how that which is other (to the repeated identity) and singular in the face of these repetitions only emerges through these iterations. See “Afterword,” 119(215f.): “Let us not forget that ‘iterability’ does not signify simply, as Searle seems to think, repeatability of the same, but rather alterability of this same idealized in the singularity of the event, for instance, in this or that speech act. It entails the necessity of thinking at once both the rule and the event, concept and singularity. There is thus a reapplication (without transparent self-reflection and without pure self-identity) of the principle of iterability to a concept of iterability that is never pure. 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. The concept of iterability is this singular concept that renders possible the silhouette of ideality, and hence of the concept, and hence of all distinction, of all conceptual opposition. But it is also the concept that, at the same time, with the same stroke marks the limit of idealization and of conceptualization: ‘concept’ or quasi-concept of concept in its conceptualizable relation to the non-concept.” (“N'oublions pas qu’’itérabilité’ ne signifie pas simplement, comme semble le penser Searle, répétabilité du même, mais altérabilité de ce même idéalisé dans la singularité de l'événement, par exemple de tel ou tel speech act. Il s'agit de penser par là à la fois la règle et l'événement, le concept et la singularité. Il y a donc une réapplication (sans self reflexion transparente et sans identité à soi pure) du principe d'itérabilité à un concept d'itérabilité qui n'est jamais pur. Il n'y a pas d'idéalisations sans itérabilité (identifiante), mais pour la même raison, en raison de l'itérabilité (altérante), il n'y a pas d'idéalisation tenue pure, à l'abri de toute contamination. Le concept d'itérabilité est ce singulier concept qui rend possible la silhouette de l'idéalité, donc du concept, et donc de toute distinction, ou de toute opposition conceptuelle. Mais c'est aussi le 'concept' qui, du même coup, marque la limite de l'idéalisation et de la conceptualisation: 'concept' ou quasi-concept du concept dans son rapport conceptualisable au non-concept.”).
insofar as it relies on the ambiguity of the term ‘tout autre’, is more than just a repetition. The phrase can be seen as referring to the tout autre obliquely in or as the space that separates and makes impure each repetition. It is this oblique reference that resists the linguistically induced temptation to reify the tout autre and think about it as a specific thing or quality in the world, as the big ‘Wholly Other.’

At first, it might seem that in this seeming tautology the tout autre is simply referred to twice, a repetition or iteration that would indicate the iterability of ‘tout autre’ as a concept, i.e. insofar it exhibits universality and self-sameness. However, the tout autre is hinted at in this phrase precisely in the in-between. The tout autre emerges in that difference between one ‘tout autre’ and another ‘tout autre,’ a difference that, to be sure, can be cashed out in terms of a difference of meaning (e.g. ‘every other’ vs. ‘wholly other’), which is to say in terms of different contexts of meaning. However, the difference is also enacted here in the way that the term is uttered at a different moment in time and in the way it occupies a different space on the page, something also linked to the tout autre’s different spatio-temporal locations within the sentence. We are thus dealing with a difference of time and space, of temporalization and spatialization. This is “the differance of the other,” where the perfect repetition of the concept of the tout autre

[78] This is insofar as it has different grammatical functions. Grammar here should not be understood as a logical non-spatio-temporal structure. This is because grammar would have to be thought as dependent on the way we actually communicate. This communication, in turn, must always involve space and time (see previous footnote).

[79] Derrida uses this phrase in “Psyche” in a context that also relates to the way the phrase “Tout autre est tout autre” operates here. In the way it both states and performs what it refers to, and insofar as the iterability that it illustrates renders unstable any concept – not just that of the tout autre or of iterability – the phrase “Tout autre est tout autre,” we might say drawing on Derrida’s discussion of invention, “continues to unsettle the conditions of the performative and of whatever distinguishes it comfortably from the constative.” Thus, “[t]his writing is liable to the other, opened to and by the other, to the work of the
fails each time, because it is each time repeated in a different context of space, time and meaning, a difference in context which changes it. What is thus shown is that the term *tout autre*, like any other entity (conceptual or otherwise), only has “a differing, deferring, [différante] that is to say, impure, unity.” It defers its own self-presence,

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80 “*Archive Fever*,” 51, FN 15(125, FN 2). Derrida, in the context of talking about the impossibility of a perfect unity that lies precisely in the way the other affects this unity through the necessity of repetition, also talks about the unity of the French language, which he considers it to be necessary to assume even though it can only be impure. He writes: “I believe that the affirmation of a certain idiomaticity, of a certain uniqueness, as of a certain differing, deferring, that is to say, impure, unity is irreducible and necessary…” (“Je crois irréductible et nécessaire l'affirmation d'une certaine idiomaticité, d'une certaine unicité, comme d'une certaine unité différente, c'est-à-dire impure.”).
differing from itself.

However, it is precisely in this way that it produces an instance of the tout autre, the wholly other, i.e. an instance of that which is un-repeatable or which is left over or out from each repetition. Although there is “no idealization without (identificatory) iterability,…for the same reason, for reasons of (altering) iterability, there is no idealization that keeps itself pure, safe from all contamination” by the “nonconcept,” the singular and unrepeatable arrival of something “altering,” something other. Thus, when Derrida says that the proposition “tout autre est tout autre” “seals the contract between universality and the exception of singularity, of the ‘whoever’ [n’importe qui],” we should read this not just as the way in which absolute alterity and thus singularity is assigned to every other (“Every other is wholly other”), but also in the way that the seeming repetition of the phrase illustrates the operation of singularity.

And this singularity of the whoever can indeed be attributed to and exhibited by any specific individualized, and already categorized other, “each one, for example…each man or woman, even…each living thing, human or not.”

‘The other’ then derives its conceptual meaning, its iterability, by designating that which each time only presents itself as absent in its non-iterable singularity. This is why

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82 Derrida, Gift of Death, 87(121). See above FN 72.

83 Derrida, Gift of death, 83(116); translation modified (David Wills ends the sentence after “each man and woman” (“chaque homme ou femme”)): “The other attributes to or recognizes in this infinite alterity of the wholly other, every other, in other words each, each one, for example each man and woman, even each living being, human or not.” (“L’autre partition attribue ou reconnait cette infinie altérité du tout autre à tout autre: autrement dit à chacun, à chaque un, par exemple à chaque homme ou femme, voire à chaque vivant, humain ou non.”).
its iterations cannot be strictly distinguished along the lines of repeatable categories so as to yield clearly distinguishable meanings, one ethical and one non-ethical. This does not mean, however, that the other emerges in a context of complete indeterminacy. On the contrary, the other refers to a certain aporetic structure of excess that derives its respective meaning always in a particular identifiable context and with regard to particular identifiable entity (something we will return to in the context of the undecidable). But because the other designates precisely also that which in each such context exceeds it, the term cannot refer to a specific identifiable kind of object or subject and cannot be limited to a particular context. It is not that every other is the same, but, on the contrary, that every other is different — whence Derrida's insistence on multiplying rather than reducing differences.  

It is because of this peculiar aporetic feature of alterity that is does indeed not seem fully clear what exactly is meant by ‘the other.’ It seems to not just be different in each singular context, but to have different general meanings. The other can be the non-ego as well as the alter ego. It can be that which is beyond language (something like the deferred “referent” that language presupposes but does not contain). It can be that

84 Derrida, “Violence against Animals,” 72(121). See above chapter 1, FN 50.

85 Derrida, “Eating Well,” 263(278); “It is within, one might say (but it is precisely a question of the effraction of the within) the living present, that Urform of the transcendental experience, that the subject conjoins with nonsubject or that the ego is marked, without being able to have the originary and presentative experience of it, by the non-ego and especially by the alter ego.” (“C'est à l'intérieur, si on peut dire (mais justement il y va d'une effraction de l'intérieur) du présent vivant, cette Urform de l'expérience transcendantale, que le sujet compose avec du non-sujet ou que l'ego se trouve marqué, sans pouvoir en faire l'expérience originaire et présentative, par du non-ego et surtout de l'alter ego.”).

86 Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” 123f.(26): “There have been several misinterpretations of what I and other deconstructionists are trying to do. It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the ‘other’ of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language,
which is the presupposed as the constitutive outside of any system, entity and form of identity (be it a system of thought, a living organism, a subject, or an intentional act), or the difference that marks temporalization and spatialization.\textsuperscript{87}

Put differently, we might say about alterity what Derrida says about aporia (for example in *Force of Law*) namely that there is “only one” alterity, only one “potential” of

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\textsuperscript{87} It can for example be that which marks death (*Of Grammatology*, 70(103). See below chapter 4, FN 37) or that within me that I cannot make present in experience or consciousness, but that nevertheless constitutes me as, for instance, a deciding subject (see *The Politics of Friendship*, 68(87); see below FN 98) or a self-affecting (i.e. living) subject (see *Of Grammatology*, 165(235f.); see above FN 45). Insofar as ‘the other’ is also that which exceeds what a given system of thought and experience can understand as possible, Derrida also refers to it as the impossible (Derrida, “Psyche” 15(26f.). See above chapter 1, FN 1). See also above FN 9.
alterity or alterity as “potential,” but one that “infinitely distributes itself”—a similarity which is not accidental given that alterity emerges in the aporetic movement between repetition and singularity. And, as we will see in the next section on decision and responsibility, this also corresponds to the idea of a “single duty [or ought or must: devoir, T.B.] that,” as Derrida puts it in Aporias, “recurrently duplicates itself interminably, fissures itself, and contradicts itself without remaining the same, that is, concerning the only and single ‘contradictory double imperative’”

What thus seems like an equivocation in the term ‘the other,’ its difference from itself according to different contexts, is in fact the only way we can conceive of what is other. This is because ‘the other’ is a relative term. That which is other, if it is to figure in our experience, thought or discourse at all, must always be the other of something recognizable and thus iterable, of a specific context or determination. And it can emerge in any such context. At the same time, the other qua other is that which within any specific context is singular. It thus exceeds the identifying conditions of this context, i.e. it exceeds it insofar as it (the context) is determinable and describable in general terms that make it repeatable or iterable and thus non-singular. And it is precisely because of this feature that the other can play the crucial role for ethics and experience that Derrida assigns to it. This is insofar as both are constituted by an aporetic negotiation between the

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88 We might, in more precise Derridean terminology, say an alterity that may be (peut être), or a may-be (peut être) of alterity.

89 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 250(48); translation modified: “In fact, there is only one aporetic potential that infinitely distributes itself.” (“En fait il s’agit d’un seul potentiel aporétique qui se distribue à l’infini.”). See also Aporias, 16(37). See above FN 25.

90 Derrida, Aporias, 16(37). See above FN 25.
singular and the general.

So far, what I have established is that Derrida draws a parallel between ethics and experience that revolves around the concepts of alterity and aporia. I also hope to have shown that we cannot meaningfully distinguish the alterity and the aporia that is constitutive of ethics from the alterity and the aporia that is constitutive of experience. However, this does still not show how the alterity we encounter through and as experience, or how indeed any other we experience, can be seen to engage our ethical responsibility. After all, alterity could just be the necessary condition of both ethics (understood through the notions of moral obligation and responsibility) and experience without at the same time being already the sufficient condition for ethics. Thus, there might be further limiting conditions that establish a limit between the encounter with alterity in general that is experience and the encounter with alterity that makes an experience ethical.

I argue that such limiting conditions cannot be established in any permanent fashion insofar as their establishment would itself be subject to ethical scrutiny. To understand this, we will have to understand two of the crucial elements of Derrida's conception of ethical life, namely decision and responsibility, in their relation to alterity. What will become apparent is that, because ethical responsibility starts with the other, it cannot be conceptually limited. This is because the concepts on which we would have to rely to establish any permanent exclusion of certain experiences or entities from the purview of responsibility would themselves be subject to a responsible re-evaluation in each singular situation that calls for their application (either to establish inclusion or
exclusion). This relies on the assumption that each situation, each momentary relation between the other and me, is singular. It is because of this singularity that concepts in their generality cannot exhaustively describe and resolve such a situation for us. They would require a decision at each moment of their application, a decision for which we are responsible insofar as it cannot (in its unrepeatable singularity) be grounded in any further conceptual generality.

Thus, any purportedly permanent and conceptually justified exclusion is potentially subject to be breached at each singular encounter with those conceptually excluded from the purview of moral obligations and responsibility. In order to understand the grounds for this conception of responsibility and obligation I will now turn to the role that alterity plays for ethics and, more specifically, for (free) decision and responsibility in Derrida's work. As we will see, Derrida provides a kind of minimalist procedural account of ethical responsibility that can be shown to apply to all experience. Thus, after looking at Derrida's account of decision and responsibility, we will, in particular in chapter 3, return to the parallel (resulting from an intertwinement) we began to establish between experience in general and ethical experience to show how responsibility is one of the constitutive elements of the experiencing subject. Derrida’s understanding of the trace and of différance will be particularly important in this context.

**Derrida's Ethics of Responsibility: The Undecidable, Free Decision and Duty**

_A Brief Note on Derrida's Argumentative Strategy_

Before beginning to outline Derrida's reconception of ethics, I want to make a brief remark about the argumentative strategy Derrida presents us with in his work on
ethics (as well as elsewhere\textsuperscript{91}). As we already briefly indicated above when talking about Derrida's ambiguous take on experience, Derrida does not simply criticize the ethical concepts he inherits (such as responsibility, decision, freedom, response and obligation) in order to replace them with alternative concepts, or with more coherent versions of the same concepts.\textsuperscript{92} Rather, Derrida, in order to drive his argument, relies on certain inherited but deep-seated intuitions on how we determine the concepts of, say, decision, duty, response and responsibility – for example that a decision must involve a transcendental kind of freedom that is, on a certain level (to be determined), irreducible to any kind of determinacy or predictability.

\textsuperscript{91} One place where Derrida expresses this general strategy of deconstruction (with regard to the particular example of the concept of writing) is at the end of “Signature, Event, Context,” where Derrida emphasizes the importance of taking seriously historicity. This means taking seriously the interplay between conceptual and nonconceptual forces and the impossibility of simply stepping outside the socio-temporal context that enables the meaning of any given concept. It means to take seriously that conceptual changes take time and to acknowledge that the communicability of any conceptual or philosophical intervention still depends on the very space into which it intervenes in order to be intelligible or communicable. Derrida writes: “Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated. For example, writing, as a classical concept, carries with it predicates which have been subordinated, excluded, or held in reserve by forces and according to necessities to be analyzed. It is those predicates (I have recalled several of them) whose force of generality, generalization, and generativity find themselves liberated, grafted onto a ‘new’ concept of writing which also corresponds to what always has resisted the former organization of forces, which always has constituted the remainder irreducible to the dominant force which organized the – to say it quickly – logocentric hierarchy. To leave to this new concept the old name of writing is to maintain the structure of the graft, the transition and indispensable adherence to an effective intervention in the constituted historical field. It is also to give to their chance and their force, their power of communication, to everything played out in the operations of deconstruction.” (329f./393: “La déconstruction ne consiste pas à passer d'un concept à un autre mais à renverser et à déplacer un ordre conceptuel aussi bien que l'ordre non conceptuel auquel il s'articule. Par exemple, l'écriture, comme concept classique, comporte des prédicats qui ont été subordonnés, exclus ou tenus en réserve par des forces et selon des nécessités à analyser. Ce sont ces prédicats (j'en ai rappelé quelques-uns) dont la force de généralité, de généralisation et de générativité se trouve libérée, greffée sur un ‘nouveau’ concept d'écriture qui correspond aussi à ce qui a toujours résisté à l'ancienne organisation des forces, qui a toujours constitué le reste, irréductible à la force dominante qui organisait la hiérarchie – disons, pour faire vite, logocentrique. Laisser à ce nouveau concept le vieux nom d'écriture, c'est maintenir la structure de greffe, le passage et l'adhérence indispensable à une intervention effective dans le champ historique constitué. C'est donner à tout ce qui se joue dans les opérations de déconstruction la chance et la force, le pouvoir de la communication.”).

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
However, it is in relying on these conceptual implications which Derrida inherits that he moves beyond this very inheritance by showing the aporetic structure and thus the alterity at the heart of these concepts; or he shows, in other words, that at a certain point, if pushed far enough, these concepts can no longer remain internally consistent or strictly separable from what is usually seen as a clearly distinct meanings or indeed from their presumed opposite (response, for instance, is shown to not be strictly distinguishable from reaction). They do no longer follow the logic of “all or nothing,” which Derrida designates as the telos of any concept as such.93 Rather, it is shown that, like “every

93 Derrida, “Afterword,” 116f.(211f.): “Every concept that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative of ‘all or nothing.’ Even if in ‘reality’ or in ‘experience’ everyone believes he knows that there is never ‘all or nothing,’ a concept determines itself only according to ‘all or nothing.’ Even the concept of ‘difference of degree,’ the concept of relativity is, qua concept, determined according to the logic of all or nothing, of yes or no: differences of degree or nondifference of degree. It is impossible or illegitimate to form a philosophical concept outside this logic of all or nothing. But one can (and it is what I try to do elsewhere) think or deconstruct the concept of concept otherwise, think a différence which would be neither of nature nor of degree, and of which I say – as of other analogous motifs, iterability for example, about which there will be much to rediscuss – that they are not entirely words or concepts. But it is true, when a concept is to be treated as a concept I believe that one has to accept the logic of all or nothing. I always try to do this and I believe that it always has to be done, at any rate, in a theoretical-philosophical discussion of concepts or of things conceptualizable. Whenever one feels obliged to stop doing this (as happens to me when I speak of différence, of mark, of supplement, of iterability and of all they entail), it is better to make explicit in the most conceptual, rigorous, formalizing, and pedagogical manner possible the reasons one has for doing so, for thus changing the rules and the context of discourse. This is better for thought and for the relation to the other, the two of which I do not separate here: neither from each other nor from the ‘experience’ of différence.” (‘Tout concept qui prétend à quelque rigueur implique l’alternative du ‘tout ou rien.’ Même si dans la ‘réalité’ ou dans l’‘expérience,’ chacun croit savoir qu’il n’y a jamais de ‘tout ou rien,’ un concept ne se détermine que selon le ‘tout ou rien.’ Même le concept de la ‘différence de degré,’ le concept de la relativité est, en tant que concept, déterminé selon la logique du tout ou rien, du oui ou non: différence de degré ou non-différence de degré. Il est impossible ou illégitime de former un concept philosophique hors de cette logique du tout ou rien. Mais on peut (et c’est ce que je tente de faire ailleurs) penser ou déconstruire autrement le concept de concept, penser une différence qui ne soit ni de nature ni de degré, et dont je dis, comme d’autres motifs analogues, par exemple l’itérabilité dont nous allons beaucoup reparler, que ce ne sont plus tout à fait des mots ou des concepts. Mais c’est vrai, quand on traite un concept comme concept, je crois qu’on doit se soumettre à la logique du tout ou rien. Je tâche toujours de le faire et je crois qu’il faut toujours le faire. En tout cas, dans une discussion théorico-philosophique sur des concepts ou sur des choses conceptualisables. Quand on croit devoir cesser de le faire (comme cela m’arrive quand je parle de différence, de marque, de supplément, d’itérabilité et de tout ce qui s’ensuit, il vaut mieux déclarer de façon aussi conceptuelle, rigoureuse, formalisante et pédagogique que possible les raisons qu’on a de le faire, de changer ainsi les règles et le contexte du discours. Cela vaut
concept,” each of these concepts is “always dislocating itself because it is never one with itself.”\(^9^4\)

But rather than taking this as a reason for dismissing these concepts as useless or in need of philosophical ‘repair’ or refinement because of what might seem like mere inconsistencies in need of amelioration, Derrida attempts to rethink these concepts. They are no longer seen as in need of or indeed capable of full consistency and intelligibility. Rather, these concepts can only function as revolving around a necessary aporia, i.e. the need to simultaneously, but irreconcilably, rely on both singularity and generality or repeatability, activity and passivity, control and a complete lack thereof, presence and absence. And they function this way because that which they designate is subject to the same aporia, the “one aporetic potential”\(^9^5\) that we referred to above. Thus, the experience of these concepts as well as of that which they designate becomes both possible and impossible.\(^9^6\)

\(^9^4\) Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 53(132): “Thus it is for every concept: always dislocating itself because it is never one with itself.” (“Ainsi va tout concept: toujours se disloquant parce qu’il ne fait jamais un avec lui-même.”). Every concept is always haunted by its other possibilities: “[T]he spectral motif stages this disseminating fission from which the archontic principle, and the concept of the archive, and the concept in general suffer, from the principle on.” (ibid. 54/132: “Le motif spectral met bien en scène cette fission disséminante dont s'affectent dès le principe et le principe archontique, et le concept d'archive, et le concept en général.” Elsewhere in the same text, he says that the “concept of the archive must inevitably carry in itself, as does every concept, an unknowable weight [or ‘a weight of the unthought’: \textit{un poids d'impensé}, T.B.]” (ibid., 24(52): “[L]e concept d'archive ne peut pas ne pas garder en lui, comme tout concept, un poids d'impensé”). This is the weight of the past and the future, of memory, archive and promise.


\(^9^6\) Derrida, \textit{The Other Heading}, 41(43); see above FN 25.
The Other and Ethics: An Outline of What Lies Ahead

How then does alterity mark the opening of ethics? And how are we to understand ethics here? What I will show is that alterity is crucial for an understanding of certain constitutive elements of ethics. Specifically, alterity allows for free decision and response through and as the experience of undecidability. It also is what implicates me in a situation in such a way as to allow for the experience of duty (or the “must” or “should:” *devoir*97). These elements – undecidability, free decision or response, and obligation or duty – are what constitutes responsibility. It is this latter feature which I take to be the central characteristic of ethics for Derrida and on which I will focus at the end of this chapter.

Understanding how these elements are related to each other and to alterity will be the basis on which we can later show how the basic features of a certain ethical responsibility (to be determined below) are constitutive of human beings qua living experiencing beings. Ultimately, we aim to show how everything we experience involves us in such a way as to hold us, in a certain sense, responsible for what we experience and for how we experience it. Specifically, we are responsible for how we relate to what we experience both theoretically and practically: We are responsible for the concepts and

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97 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 91(123). Derrida uses the English terms “must” and “should” to translate *doit* (3rd person singular, present, indicative of the verb *devoir*, a word which is also a noun that translates as “duty”), and also again relates it to the “il faut.” He writes: “‘Post-historical man doit ....’ writes Kojève, ‘Doit’ what? Is ‘doit’ to be translated here as ‘must’ or ‘should’? *Whatever may be the case concerning the modality or the content* of this ‘devoir,’ whatever may be the necessity of this prescription, even if it calls for eternities of interpretation, there is an ‘it is necessary’ [*il faut*] for the future.” (“‘L’homme post-historique doit....’ dit Kojève. Que doit-il? Doit, est-ce ‘must’ ou ‘should’? *Quoi qu’il en soit de la modalité ou du contenu* de ce devoir, quelle que soit la nécessité de cette prescription, même si elle appelle des éternités d’interprétation, il y a un ‘il faut’ pour l’avenir.”).
categories that frame and enable our experience, for the position we take with regard to what we experience on the basis of these concepts and categories and, finally, responsible for whatever action we take towards that which we experience.

It is, furthermore, on the basis of Derrida's rethinking of these basic elements of ethics – duty, decision and responsibility – that he can also provide us with an understanding of how relations and experiences of responsibility towards entities we designate through the category of inanimate nature are possible. As we will elaborate in further detail in chapters 4-6, Derrida shows us how these experiences are possible in a way that no longer places agency exclusively or simply on the side of the human. Rather, we relate to others as always exceeding our agency and cognitive and agential powers in the very way that they affect us.

What I aim to show here is that alterity opens ethics or makes it possible as the experience of responsibility. It makes it possible, first, in the sense of enabling certain necessary experiential components of ethical life and, second and simultaneously, in the sense of endowing these components with a certain kind of force or necessity. More precisely, alterity enables these components as precisely of a certain force or necessity. And it does so in a way which makes their experience, as we will see in more detail later, both one of ability or power [pouvoir] and one of in-ability or in-capacity [impouvoir], of activity and passivity. It would make possible (as impossible) the experience of a “passive decision”⁹⁸ as simultaneously the “nonpassive endurance of the aporia” which

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⁹⁸ Derrida, Politics of Friendship, 68(87): “A theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision. But this must be said a fortiori of the event, and of the event with regard to the decision. For if nothing ever happens to a subject, nothing deserving the name ‘event’, the schema of decision tends regularly – at least, in its ordinary and hegemonic sense (that which seems dominant still in Schmittian
constitutes “the condition of responsibility and of decision.” “Ought,’ would, in fact, imply ‘cannot’ as much as ‘can.’

Now, as regards the enabling aspect of alterity, that which it makes possible or enables (by also disabling them) are experiences of response and responsibility as well as of (free) decision. These elements are central to ethics as Derrida indicates for decisionism, in his theory of exception and of sovereignty) – to imply the instance of the subject, a classic, free, and wilful subject, therefore a subject to whom nothing can happen, not even the singular event for which he believes to have taken and kept the initiative: for example, in an exceptional situation. But should one imagine, for all that, a ‘passive’ decision, as it were, without freedom, without that freedom? Without that activity, and without the passivity that is mated to it? But not, for all that, without responsibility?

Would one have to show hospitality to the impossible itself – that is, to what the good sense of all philosophy can only exclude as madness or nonsense: a passive decision, an originally affected decision? Such an undesirable guest can intrude into the closed space or the home ground of common sense only by recalling, as it were, so as to derive authority from it, an old forgotten invitation. It would thus recall the type or the silhouette of the classic concept of decision, which must interrupt and mark an absolute beginning. Hence it signifies in me the other who decides and rends. The passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, another event, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolute other in me, the other as the absolute that decides on me in me.” (Derrida, Aporias, 16(37). See above FN 25.

100 I say experiences instead of abilities or capacities because, as we already indicated above, Derrida will precisely problematize the sense of these components of moral life as simply powers or abilities.

101 Although Derrida notes in Rogues, 43f.(69) that he usually does not use the term “freedom” (“liberté”) very often because he is worried about the metaphysical charge it carries, he does refer to the need for a “free decision” (“décision libre”) in “Force of Law,” 252(53). Furthermore, he writes in Beast and Sovereign that while a certain notion of freedom (at work in the idea of the free autonomous subject for
example in his contribution to *Le génome et son double* (translated in *Negotiations*), where he implies that a decision, in order to be “ethical, political, juridical, etc.,” must “involve freedom and responsibility”\(^{102}\)

example) must be criticized, it is not a matter of abolishing the notion but of rethinking it (along with such notions as responsibility) in light of deconstruction (I, 301(402); translation modified. See below FN 168). See also *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, where Derrida talks about the decision, responsibility and free obligation as requiring the undecidable. This is because “[w]hen the givens of a problem or a task do not appear as infinitely contradictory, placing me before the aporia of a double injunction, then I know in advance what it is necessary to do. I believe to know it (or, as the official translation says, I believe the knowledge: je crois le savoir), this knowledge commands and programmes the action: it is done, there is no more decision or responsibility to take. On the contrary, a certain non-knowledge must leave me disarmed before what I have to do so that I have to do it in order for me to feel freely obligated (librement obligé) and bound to respond to it.” (53f.(128); translation modified: “Quand les données d'un problème ou d'une tâche n'apparaissent pas comme infiniment contradictoires, me plaçant devant l'aporie d'une double injonction, alors je sais d'avance ce qu'il fait faire, je crois le savoir, ce savoir commande et programme l'action : c'est fait, il n'y a plus de décision ni de responsabilité à prendre. Un certain non-savoir doit au contraire me laisser démuni devant ce que j'ai à faire pour que j'aie à le faire, pour que je m'y sente librement obligé et tenu d'en répondre.").

\(^{102}\) Derrida, “Human Genome,” 200(144): “[W]hat this means is that the decisions we need to discuss here, the recommendations we need to make, if they are ethical, political, juridical, etc., if they involve [or concern: concerne, T.B.] freedom and responsibility,...” (“[C]ela veut dire que les décisions dont nous avons à parler ici, les recommandations que nous avons à faire, si elles sont éthiques, politiques, juridiques, etc., si elles concernent la liberté et la responsabilité.”). The entire quote, which speaks to the central role of freedom, decision and responsibility for Derrida's conception of ethics runs as follows: “[T]here is a troubling and painful paradox when we have to acknowledge the fact that the concepts of responsibility and freedom do of course call for the establishment, the institution of norms, or the reference to norms, but that they also, at the same time, call for a suspensive attitude with regard to the norm and normality. A responsibility or an ethical decision, intent on modeling itself after, or ordering itself according to, a scientific or allegedly scientific knowledge that establishes the norm or normality – that is, a responsibility or an ethical decision that would be satisfied with unfolding a theoretical program or the content of a knowledge regarding a norm-obviously would not be, in the rigorous sense of the term, an act of responsibility or freedom. What this means, abstractly – I will say it abstractly first, then I will say it concretely – however paradoxical it may seem, is that freedom and responsibility are incompatible with the mere reporting of the existence of a norm, a normative reality. Freedom is free with regard to such a normative reality, as is responsibility. If there is responsibility, if there is an ethical and free decision, responsibility and decision must, at a given moment, be discontinuous with the normative or the “normal,” not in their misrecognition of norms, not in their ignorance of a knowledge about norms – rather they must take a leap and welcome a sort of discontinuity, a heterogeneity in relation to the normative as such. This may seem shocking, but it follows from the very concept of freedom and responsibility. The statement thus appeared a little speculative. But concretely, what this means is that the decisions we need to discuss here, the recommendations we need to make, if they are ethical, political, juridical, etc., if they involve freedom and responsibility, must naturally take into account the scientific knowledge about the aforementioned norms, mono norms, polynorms, but must not leave to knowledge or expect from the knowledge that science has at its disposal, any of the political, ethical, etc. decisions that we are discussing here. This means that, at a certain moment, questions of norm must escape scientificity, they must escape a technoscientific programming.” (Ibid., 199-201(143f.): “[I]l y a un paradoxe troublant et douloureux à devoir prendre acte du fait que les concepts de responsabilité et de liberté en appellent, bien sûr, à l'établissement,
At the same time, alterity is also that which endows the experience of these very elements with a certain force or necessity: We have to decide, and we have to respond – even where we might not simply be able anymore. And it is because every other is what both requires and what enables a response, a response that is owed or due (dû: past perfect of devoir, which also means ‘to owe’¹⁰³) that Derrida states that “[t]he simple concepts of alterity and of singularity constitute the concept of duty [devoir] as much as

¹⁰³ Derrida employs this double meaning for example in Beast and Sovereign where he writes: “[T]he world is far, the world is gone, in the absence or distance of the world, I must [je dois], I owe it to you [je te dois], I owe it to myself [je me dois] to carry you, without world, without the foundation or grounding of anything in the world, without any foundational or fundamental meditation, one on one, like wearing mourning or bearing a child, basically where ethics begins.” (II, 105(160): “[L]e monde est au loin, le monde est parti, dans l'absence ou l'éloignement du monde, je dois, je te dois, je me dois de te porter, sans monde, sans la fondation ou l'assise de rien au monde, sans médiation fondatrice ou fondamentale, seul à seul, comme qui porte de deuil et qui porte l'enfant, là où commence en somme l'éthique.”).
that of responsibility.”\textsuperscript{104} It is through the operation of alterity and singularity, which make impossible any pure identity or self-sameness, that we will have to understand the link between necessity as duty, on the one hand, and possibility as the ability to respond responsibly, on the other hand. It is because no experience (i.e. neither the situation we experience nor ourselves as experiencing) is ever self-same (i.e. without an alterity that resists full repeatability) that we can always imagine a situation differently or see different possibilities. There is a conflict between all the different possibilities of a situation that (as we will see below with the undecidable) creates the need for decision that we cannot escape. Because nothing ever simply ‘is,’ there emerges room for an ‘ought’ (\textit{devoir}) beyond (or, rather, within) the ‘is,’ or for a duty (\textit{devoir}). “[T]here is only duty in conflict.”\textsuperscript{105} We will discuss this link between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ further in the following chapter through the notion of différance and of the originary performative. However, it is already crucial in this chapter in order to understand Derrida's notion of responsibility and how it is linked to the undecidable.

And, as we will see, it is because of this central role of others for the experience of decision, \textit{devoir} and responsibility that the possibility of these experiences must also be thought as their impossibility – an impossibility defined as an irreducible resistance to

\textsuperscript{104} Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, 68(98): “The simple concepts of alterity and of singularity constitute the concept of duty as much as that of responsibility. As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia.” ("Les simples concepts d'altérité et de singularité sont constitutifs aussi bien du concept de devoir que de celui de responsabilité. Ils vouent \textit{a priori} les concepts de responsabilité, de décision ou de devoir au paradoxe, au scandale et à l'aporie.").

\textsuperscript{105} Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” 89(169): “[I]l n'y a que du devoir dans le conflit.” It should be noted that the original French is lost for this text and that the French is merely a re-translation of the English.
full consistency, knowledge and control. I will now begin to outline how precisely Derrida rethinks these concepts.

The Undecidable

Specifically, I will now further elucidate this aporetic logic of decision (and responsibility) by looking at one of the central concepts for Derrida's thoughts on ethics, namely undecidability or the undecidable. As Derrida puts it at one point: “If we analysed the concepts of decision and responsibility in a cool manner, we would find that undecidability is irreducible within them.” Undecidability is also crucial to understand the role that alterity plays for Derrida's conception of ethics. This is due to the fact that the undecidable, as we will see in more detail below, indicates the breaking of automaticity and repeatability. It can thus only be understood through and as the experience of that which is singular and thus other. Undecidability, as lying in the resistance to any simple repetition of what we already know, cannot, in other words, be experienced as of the order of the same, as that which remains strictly in the order of knowledge and control (through which we strive to constitute what each of us calls for example ‘my self’ and ‘my world.’). There needs to be, as Derrida puts it in “Typewriter Ribbon,” “some nonprogrammable and therefore incalculable singularity,...” which “ought not, so we think, to give in or be reduced to repetition.” This is because what

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106 As is the case with ‘the other’ (see above FN 9), the singular definite article should here not be taken to indicate undecidability as designating a single clearly delimitable phenomenon.

107 Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” 88(168): “Si nous analysions froidement les concepts de décision et de responsabilité, nous découvririons que l'indécidabilité y est irréductible.”

constitutes the undecidable – and thus the possibility (and, as we will see, impossibility) of decision and responsibility – is the differencing-deferring of the same that introduces and is introduced by alterity, or the *différance* of identity into non-identity. As Derrida writes in the “Afterword” in *Limited Inc.*: “[I]n order for structures of undecidability to be possible (and *hence* structures of decisions and *hence* of responsibilities as well), there must be a certain play, *différance*, nonidentity.”¹⁰⁹ Undecidability thus lies in our “relation to the other.”¹¹⁰

It is this differencing-deferring of any identity, this vulnerability of any self-sameness to alterity (which we will discuss further in chapter 3) that also marks undecidability as a permanent or irreducible structural feature of any conception of practical reason and life we could come up with. And it is a permanent feature that marks the impossibility of closure or finality for any of our ethical decisions – which is the only way responsible decisions are possible as responsible decisions (i.e. as non-automatic responses).

Undecidability is the experience of that which appears as other, as irreducible to what we know, understand, remember, anticipate, believe or can make otherwise mentally

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¹⁰⁹ Derrida, “Afterword,” 149(274f.); translation modified: “To be sure, in order for structures of undecidability to be possible (and *hence* structures of decisions and *hence* of responsibilities as well), there must be a certain play, *différance*, nonidentity. Not of indetermination, but of *différance* or of nonidentity with oneself in the very process of determination.” (“Bien sûr, pour que des structures d’indécidabilité soient possibles (et *donc* des décisions et *donc* des responsabilités), il faut bien qu’il y ait du jeu ou de la différance, de la non-identité. Non pas de l’indétermination, mais de la différance ou de la non-identité à soi dans la détermination même.”).

¹¹⁰ Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” 89(169): “Undecidability continues to inhabit the decision and the latter does not close itself off from the former. The relation to the other does not close itself off, and it is because of this that there is history and one tries to act politically.” (“L’indécidabilité continue d’habiter la décision et cette dernière ne se referme pas sur la première. La relation à l’autre ne se referme pas, et c’est pour cela qu’il y a histoire et que l’on essaie d’agir politiquement.”). Unfortunately, the original French manuscript for this text has been lost. We only have the French retranslation of Critchley’s English translation.
present. Conversely, alterity can be seen as entering our experience as the experience of undecidability. If “[u]ndecidability continues to inhabit the decision and the latter does not close itself off from the former,” it is because “[t]he relation to the other does not close itself off.”\footnote{Ibid.} It is, in other words, because alterity marks something's or someone's resistance to any full inclusion into the domain of my consciousness, my experience, or my knowledge that it carries in its wake the experience of the undecidable.

At the same time, it is precisely in its otherness in relation to the self-presence of knowledge and consciousness that undecidability is the condition for the possibility of an ethical decision. Undecidability can hence be seen as a crucial element of ethical experience that links alterity to classical components of ethical life and theory such as freedom, response, responsibility, decision and duty (devoir).

Indeed, it is due to the link between the other and the undecidable that Derrida can say, in a formulation that mirrors the above statements about alterity as the beginning or opening of ethics, that “[e]thics and politics...start with undecidability.”\footnote{Derrida, “Hospitality,” 66: “If we knew what to do, if I knew in terms of knowledge what I have to do before the decision, then the decision would not be a decision. It would simply be the application of a rule, the consequence of a premise, and there would be no problem, there would be no decision. Ethics and politics, therefore, start with undecidability. I am in front of a problem and I know that the two determined solutions are as justifiable as one another. From that point, I have to take responsibility which is heterogeneous to knowledge. If the decision is simply the final moment of a knowing process, it is not a decision...Not knowing what to do does not mean that we have to rely on ignorance and to give up knowledge and consciousness. A decision, of course, must be prepared as far as possible by knowledge by information, by infinite analysis. At some point, however, for a decision to be made you have to go beyond knowledge, to do something that you don't know, something which does not belong to, or is beyond, the sphere of knowledge.” See also Beast and Sovereign, 73(117): “For when one knows where to go, this very knowledge suspends the question and all indecision, even all undecidability. This is good sense itself. This is the very sense of sense, of sense as sense and of sense as direction.” (“Car quand on sait où aller, ce savoir même suspend la question et toute indécision, voire toute indécidabilité. C'est le bon sens même. C'est le sens même du sens, et du sens comme sens et du sens comme direction.”).}
specifically, we must understand “undecidability as condition of responsible decision,” or as the quasi-transcendental condition for both decision and responsibility. It is in these links between traditional moral concepts and alterity as forcing undecidability that these concepts are rethought as aporetic and, as we will further argue below, that they cannot be thought simply as the abilities of a free and sovereign subject. In order to understand this, we will first have to understand Derrida’s argument for the undecidable to which we will turn now.

The Operation of the Undecidable

The most common way in which Derrida presents undecidability as a necessary condition for decision and responsibility consists in arguing that only the undecidable can introduce an interruption of automaticity and of calculability. “If you don't experience some Undecidability,” Derrida writes at one point, “then the decision would simply be the application of a program, the consequence of a premise or of a matrix.” Such an interruption of the pro-gram, the pre-written, the predictable and calculable, in turn, is

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113 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 232, FN 9(152, FN 1); first and last emphasis mine: “The stake that is serving as our guiding thread here, namely, the concept or the schema of the ghost, was heralded long ago, and in its own name, across the problematics of the work of mourning, idealization, simulacrum, mimesis, iterability, the double injunction, the “double bind,” and undecidability as condition of responsible decision, and so forth.” (“L'enjeu qui nous sert ici de fil conducteur, à savoir le concept ou le schème de fantôme, s'annonçait depuis longtemps, et sous son nom, à travers les problématiques du travail du deuil, de l'idéalisation, du simulacre, de la mimesis, de l'itérabilité, de la double injonction, du “double binds” et de l'indécidabilité comme condition de la décision responsable, etc.”).

114 Derrida, “Hospitality,” 66; emphasis mine: “Many of those who have written about deconstruction understand undecidability as paralysis in face of the power to decide. That is not what I would understand by 'undecidability'. Far from opposing undecidability to decision, I would argue that there would be no decision in the strong sense of the word, in ethics, in politics, no decision and thus no responsibility without the experience of some undecidability. If you don't experience some undecidability, then the decision would simply be the application of a program, the consequence of a premise or of a matrix.” See also ibid., 73: “For me...the aporia is not simply paralysis, but the aporia or the non-way is the condition of walking: if there was no aporia we wouldn't walk, we wouldn't find our way; path-breaking implies aporia. This impossibility to find one's way is the condition of ethics.”
necessary for the constitution of what we call and experience as a free decision or response and thus of responsibility. “If one does not take rigorous account of undecidability, it will not only be the case that one cannot act, decide or assume responsibility, but one will not even be able to think the concepts of decision and responsibility.”

What I am going to assume here in order to make plausible Derrida’s account of the undecidable is that the fact that Derrida mentions decision and responsibility in one breath is not a coincidence. Indeed, I argue that the strong insistence by Derrida on the undecidable in order to understand the possibility of a (free) decision must be understood against Derrida’s worry about our inevitable tendency to close off our responsibilities. In other words, it seems that the reason that Derrida (and indeed many of us) care(s) about whether a decision was indeed a decision, i.e. a taking of a stance that is not fully determined, is not exclusively nor ultimately for theoretical reasons, but for practical ones. Questions of freedom and decision, to a large extent, come to matter to us because they closely map onto questions of responsibility. Furthermore, I submit that, for Derrida, the question of undecidability is not a question of whether or to which extent we are causally determined or not. Instead, it concerns the question of whether or not we can fully account for our actions in terms of their meaning. This will be important to keep in mind as we now turn to the argument for Derrida’s notion of the undecidable.

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115 Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” 88(168): “Si l'on ne tient pas rigoureusement compte de l'indécidabilité, non seulement on ne pourra pas agir, décider ou prendre une responsabilité, mais on ne pourra même plus penser les concepts de décision et de responsabilité.”
The Argument for Undecidability

The importance of what Derrida calls the undecidable can be supported, on the one hand, with reference to the necessary particularity of ethical deliberation and decision-making, a particularity that derives from the fact that we all occupy particular places (socio-historical, biographical, genetic etc.) in the world. This correlates to the fact that it is impossible for any of us to achieve an objective, universal view on the world that would do away with this particularity. Thus, all our ethical decisions are not fully universalizable insofar as they reflect our own subject positions (except perhaps to the extent that we ignore certain elements of particularity and just focus on certain shared aspects which we designated as relevant – but such a designation would itself only be possible based on a particular subject position). Of course, we often try to be as just as possible and include other people's views and come up with decisions that reflect more than our personal preferences. However, we cannot find an absolute answer to questions such as who deserves our moral concern and on what basis, which aspects of a situation are ethically relevant and which are not, or what weight we assign to each norm as well as to each aspect of a situation in our deliberation. Any answer to such questions will already involve an appeal to certain norms and convictions that are historically and individually particular. This is why our decisions are never simply derivable from some absolute standard, but always involve aspects of our individual subject position. They are thus not fully decidable (such that we could not possibly come to re-evaluate or regret our
decision later), but always involve an arbitrary\textsuperscript{116} decision on some level.

On the other hand, there seems to be another, more ethico-political argument for the undecidable discernable in Derrida’s texts. The argument emerges from the close link between decision and responsibility we began to outline above. It seems that the reason why Derrida often discussed together decision and responsibility is that the question of responsibility undergirds his interest in a decision as a non-determined taking of a stance.\textsuperscript{117} This second argument for the undecidable – we might call it the argument from responsibility – is important because it indicates to which extent Derrida's case for the undecidable is not just a question of factual limitations we encounter in our ethical lives as if it was just an imperfection contingent upon our finitude. Rather, Derrida insists that decision and responsibility can \textit{in principle} only be thought through the undecidable. This is yet another instantiation of Derrida’s insistence on the aporetic structures of our existence, which (in a quasi-transcendental fashion) are what enable certain features of our lives, but only on condition of also enabling their failure and ensuring their imperfection. This will be important later when we look closer at the ways that Derrida rethinks (ethical) agency.

For now, we will first look a bit more at what undecidability is, how it emerges

\textsuperscript{116} And this would be an arbitrariness similar to the arbitrariness of the sign in that it would be neither something given in nature nor something simply sovereignly decided. See \textit{Of Grammatology}, 70(103). See above chapter 1, FN 48.

\textsuperscript{117} And, we might argue, it is the reason why anyone is interested in the question of decision. If Kant establishes the distinction between humans as noumenal and as phenomenal beings, it is presumably to open an account for responsibility in the face of the moral law (while also accounting for laws of causality). Indeed, the first argument against determinism that seems to come to mind for most of us is that it would not allow us to be responsible (all the while we feel that we clearly are). And even compatibilism can only get off the ground if it still maintains an account of responsibility.
and how it differs from momentary ambiguity. Afterwards, we will look at the argument from our experience of particularity and finitude, which will then lead us to the argument from responsibility.

*The Specific Character of the Undecidable*

Before trying to make a case for the undecidable, we first need to understand a little bit better what we are arguing for, i.e. what the distinguishing feature of undecidability is.

**Conflict and Norms**

If we think about a decision as only emerging (i.e. becoming necessary and possible) in a moment of conflict (i.e. as only emerging when the way forward is not merely given and obvious while we simultaneously must find a way forward), the undecidable indicates that the conflict from which the decision emerges cannot be fully reduced.

Importantly, this irreducibility of conflict, of what first requires a decision does not mean that we are acting in a space of complete lawlessness or that my decision can be *completely* arbitrary. On the contrary, it is in the moments of conflict that a certain force of normativity, a certain ‘force of law’ first emerges in its most basic form. This is insofar as trying to resolve the conflict we are inevitably driven to wonder (either at the moment or at a later point) what would be the *best* way forward, which, in turn, involves an appeal to and search for hierarchy-enabling criteria. This could also take the form of wondering about the ‘right’ or the ‘just’ way forward. This is why, as we said above, Derrida says
that there is no ‘ought,’ no ‘duty’ (devoir) without conflict.\textsuperscript{118} If I do not find myself in a conflicting, ambiguous situation that requires decision, normativity – emerging as the difference between is and ought – cannot be experienced.

Now, against the backdrop of this necessity to draw on norms, criteria and knowledge in order to decide a conflict in which I find myself, undecidability correlates to the fact that no amount of rules, norms and deduction can, \textit{by themselves}, help us to make ‘the right’ decision, i.e. to reduce the ambiguity and the singularity of the situation absolutely. And here we can already begin to see the link between the undecidability and responsibility: if a decision cannot be fully grounded in any set of norms and knowledge, the moment of the decision always involves me in a singular way or it puts me at play as an independent agent who has to singularly position herself with regard to both the generality of norms and the singularity of the situation that needs decision. I thus become involved in the situation performatively as a situation that is never simply given to a neutral observer or agent, but requires me to take a stand as to what this situation will have been (how it is to be understood conceptually) and what it will have required (how I act and understand my own actions within it). I am responsible here because I cannot ground this responsibility in anything outside of my singular relation to the situation.

Temporary conflict vs. the undecidable

But why insist on the undecidable as the irreducibility of conflict? After all, a conflict might be temporary. It seems that the distinction we might draw with Derrida between the merely temporarily ambiguous and the undecidable, crucially depends on

\textsuperscript{118} Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” 89(169). See above FN 105.
showing that the undecidable is not simply a moment or a phase that can be contained and ultimately normatively resolved. Indeed, Derrida insists that the above-mentioned breaking of automaticity and calculability in the undecidable must not be thought as locally contained such that an otherwise perfect repetition or repeatability (of a law or a rule) passes through a clearly identifiable moment of non-repetition and non-repeatability. Rather, the undecidable, if it is not to be reduced to a simple moment of the decidable and the calculable, must make the very decision between the decidable and the undecidable, the same and the other, undecidable. If we could exactly anticipate or calculate the moment of the undecidable, it would no longer be undecidable. It is thus that, as we already said above, undecidability is “not simply a moment to be overcome by the occurrence of the decision. Undecidability continues to inhabit the decision and the latter does not close itself off from the former.”119 The decidable and calculable must be thought as always also undecidable and incalculable, while the undecidable must also always be thought as dependent on the decidable, i.e. the repeatability of normative criteria.

The case for the undecidable is then a case for the impossibility of conceptual closure and indeed the irreducibility of the alterity of time. It is thus, as we will argue later, that it will establish the unlimitable character of responsibility as well as a way to think of our interactions even with inanimate beings as an interplay of passivity and agency that cannot be contained on one side of the modern subject-object distinction. For now, let us look at the way that the undecidable emerges in our experiences of decision-

making insofar as they are experiences of particularity as well as singularity. This will then lead us to the link between responsibility and the undecidable.

First Argument: The Argument from Particularity

This first argument for the undecidable consists in the recognition that any resolution or decision of a certain situation in which I act or think responsibly with an eye towards what is right or, more specifically, towards justice (which, for Derrida, must always involve an attempt to negotiate between the singularity of the situation and the generality of rules and laws) will at some point involve me in ways that cannot be justified or explained by appeal to further norms or criteria of decision. This is because a decision must always take account of both what is intelligible in terms of certain norms and forms of knowledge in a situation and of what is unique and unprecedented in a situation. Such a taking account would require me to think together both this generality of knowledge and norms as well as the singularity of the situation in a way that cannot be mediated by appeal to further forms of knowledge or normativity. This negotiation between the general and the singular would thus have to lead up to me taking a stance. This would be a taking of a stance that would be singular in that it would have to take place without ultimate theoretical (i.e. repeatable) reassurance. This would be what a decision is for Derrida: A decision of the undecidable that (i.e. the undecidable) both opens and exceeds calculation. As Derrida puts it in Force of Law: “[T]he decision to
calculate is not of the order of the calculable, and it must not be so [et ne doit pas l’être].”

This undecidable excess over the calculable that first requires a decision is also what justice and doing justice to a situation in its singularity as well as being responsible towards this singularity and in my irreplaceable singularity would require. Thus, Derrida says that “only a decision is just.” The need for a decision, then, is the need to take a stance in the aporetic negotiation between the general and the singular that at some point cannot be justified with recourse to anything but the facticity of a decision that is singularly mine and which thus is the ultimate locus of responsibility.

I will now briefly illustrate this experience of the undecidable regarding three levels of moral deliberation (though one may identify others): First, the application and interpretation of certain norms, second, the reason I draw on certain norms and not others, and, third, the appeal to normativity as such. These moments are undecidable in the sense that at some point I must take a singular decision vis-a-vis the generality of normativity, a decision that cannot be grounded by a further appeal to the generality of a norm without facing an infinite regress (insofar as these norms would have to be put in negotiation with the singular again). Thus, every appeal to a rule becomes not a simple application, but “a reinstitution of rules” and one “which by definition is not preceded by any knowledge or by any guarantee as such.”

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121 Ibid. 253(53): “[S]eule une décision est juste.”

122 Ibid., 255(58). See below FN 130.
As regards application (1), we always need to decide how we want to apply or interpret a norm in a given situation. This is something Aristotle already recognized in the Nicomachean ethics. No rule or law can possibly anticipate each and every specific situation.

As regards inheritance (2), we always have to draw on certain inherited concepts, values and points of view that we cannot fully justify except by appeal to further inherited concepts and values – or else they could be justified by appeal to a form of life, which however, in its facticity, could not be justified either without referring to aspects of itself or, again, inherited concepts (such as violence, utility, responsibility etc.). On the one hand, undecidability here refers to the necessity of historical facticity: The norms I rely on must always come from, be inherited from, a past, something that cannot be fully justified, a past that is other (and this could refer – assuming for a moment the two could be strictly distinguished – both to our cultural and our biological past). On the other hand, these inheritances are always multiple and I have to choose, without the possibility of ultimate reassurance, which norm to apply in the face of a singular, i.e. unprecedented, situation. Thus, whether, how and to which extent to rely on this inheritance (that involves such concepts as justice, freedom, compassion, decision, responsibility etc.) and which parts of this heritage to adopt over others must involve us in a decision that is only grounded in my own practical position-taking lest we face an infinite regress.

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123 See for example book 2 of the *Nicomachean ethics* (1104a-1104b) where Aristotle writes that “the spheres of actions and of what is good for us, like those of health, have nothing fixed about them” and that “agents must always look at what is appropriate in each case as it happens.”

124 Somebody could of course deny the historicity of our norms and insist that they can be derived from a non-temporal a priori. However, on the one hand, we would then still face undecidability of application and interpretation. On the other hand, this would just shift the undecidable from the moral norms themselves to
Finally (3), each and every time I am faced with the singular situation I have to decide, without ultimate reassurance, to what extent I want to rely on the generality of norms as such, i.e. I have to decide which aspects a situation should be normatively evaluated and which should not. This is due to the fact that wherever I decide to approach a singular situation by relying on generality (be it in the form of what is common, of what is universal or of what is universalizable) I cannot rely on any further general rule that would justify such reliance on generality. Such a rule would already have to presuppose the validity and valence of generality for a particular (aspect of a) situation – similar to the way that any appeal to one aspect of our intellectual inheritance over another must already presuppose the validity of this inheritance as such.

A Possible Objection

Now, before turning to the argument from responsibility and as a transition to this argument, I want to address an objection to such an account of undecidability that has also often been formulated as an objection to Derrida's texts in general. The objection consists in the claim that deconstruction leads to moral relativism or that it undermines any sort of grounding we might have for moral norms we consider both crucial and indeed non-negotiable for our lives together. However, Derrida’s account of the undecidable does by no means indicate that we can no longer have experiences of an immediate moral imperative or an immediate need to act (although we would also have to

the epistemic norms that would help us discover or establish such norms. In other words, it would become a question of epistemic responsibility for the way we would come to know such a non-temporal a priori. This is because somebody might admit that there are moral norms that are non-temporal without thereby being certain about the right method to know these norms. The undecidable would thus return on the level of epistemic method.
talk here about how certain imperatives and norms came to be experienced as immediate¹²⁵ as well as the ways in which the immediacy of the experience of a norm does not reduce responsibility for it. What his account does speak to are the limits and the coarseness of a purely abstract approach to moral life, i.e. one that assumes the latter’s content can be exhaustively described by appeal to general rules, categories and structures. To be sure, not everything about a situation might present itself as undecidable (for example that we a prima facie duty not to kill another human being), but those are then precisely the moments where we do not decide. Moreover, this does not mean that an attempt to actually live by even these kinds of ‘indubitable’ norms will not involve the experience of the undecidable, and thus the possibility and necessity for decisions, and thus a process of responsabilization.

In order to illustrate how this is the case, let us look at the extreme example of seeing a child being severely beaten by an adult. This is no doubt something many of us would immediately perceive as something wrong and something unconditionally wrong (despite the fact that there are cultural, historical and individual deviations from this judgment and perception of absolute wrongness). There seems to be no undecidability

¹²⁵ This would relate to the necessity to reflect on how certain socially mediated categories come to influence the immediacy (or lack thereof) of our judgments and actions. We might wonder for example how and why exactly the beating of a woman by a man is seen by many people (at least in the abstract) as a situation of immediate moral wrong that calls for immediate intervention (regardless of the fact whether we end up intervening or not) while the beating of a man by a woman is – by most people – perceived in much more ambiguous terms. Similarly, we might wonder why – within the United States (but by no means limited to it) – gratuitous violence against white bodies is often seen more immediately as problematic than violence against non-white and especially black bodies. With the latter, people seem to be more drawn to searching for reasons that could excuse or even justify the violence that was exerted. If Derrida insists on the undecidable, it is certainly also because he wants to insist on the necessity to reflect on how these kinds of immediate perceptions and judgments (as well as their lack) came about and thus how we are responsible for them, i.e. how we should in principle be answerable for the kinds of norms we have adapted (consciously or unconsciously).
here. However, on the one hand, this is partly because in merely focusing on the *prima facie* wrongness of the act we evade the question of what kinds of variations and specifications of the situation might introduce undecidability. In the case I have proposed it is arguably hard to see what circumstances we could introduce to make our value-judgment anything other than immediate and unconditional (though we might think of historical and present-day approaches to child-rearing that see this kind of treatment as beneficial to the child). Even when we take, for example, the prohibition to kill human beings, it is easier to think of such circumstances. There are for example the exceptions of self-defense or preventing lethal harm to a third party.

However, even if we were to grant that the severe beating of a child does not allow for any exculpatory variations and specifications (and there are good reasons for not allowing for this), the fact remains that we are dealing with an act as expressed in an abstract and general proposition. But this is different from actually *being* in a situation thus described. Indeed, as soon as we see decisions not as being elicited in the context of simple and isolated abstractions (“It is (prima facie) wrong to severely beat a child.”), but as temporally unfolding complex situations in which a multiplicity of singular actors and relations find themselves intertwined, it is no longer a question of theoretical propositions and judgments. And indeed, as Derrida puts it, “our relation to matters like choice, decision and responsibility is not a theoretical, constative or determinate relation.”

Rather, it becomes a question of how to actually live through the described situation, or

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126 Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” 89f.(170). See below FN 139: “[N]otre relation à des questions telles que celles du choix, de la décision ou de la responsabilité n'est pas théorique, constative ou déterminée.”
of what to do, which always involve the performative enactment (or rather re-enactment or “reinstitution”127) of rules as we go along. In our example, undecidability would enter if we actually witnessed the severe beating of a child, and it would enter for example through the question of intervention.

Admittedly, we might not experience undecidability regarding the wrongness of the action performed by the person beating the child, but most of us will begin to have to go through a number of scenarios that do not seem decidable simply with recourse to a general rule: Do I intervene directly or call 911? And whether or how much I deliberate here will of course partly depend on my own personality and physical constitution. If I perceive myself as a vulnerable person, there is the undecidability between care of the self and care of another. But even if I am the kind of person for whom it is obvious that I intervene (Either because I think I can at low risk to myself or because I am (in general or at that moment) the kind of person who does not care about risk to themselves), I then have to decide how I intervene: Do I talk at the person committing the violence? Do I scream? Do I involve others (who might themselves be people with their own traumas and vulnerabilities)? Do I beat the person in turn? If I beat them, do I hit them hard enough to immediately incapacitate them (if that is the kind of thing I can do), but thus putting them at a higher risk of death or do I exert mild physical violence first as a warning, thus putting myself and the child at higher risk of continued violence? If I feel I cannot physically overwhelm the person but have a gun or a tazer, do I shoot or tazer them at the risk of killing them? Do I consider that the person exerting the violence might

be mentally ill and should this influence how I act? These are all moments where the undecidable might emerge.

And even if I am the kind of person who has a certain kind of training and disposition that allow her to engage in certain actions without thinking in these situations (maybe I am able to quickly dissuade or incapacitate the beating person at very low risk to myself, the child and the perpetrator, and I feel immediately inclined to do so), I can always revisit whatever I did in these situations and begin to question any of the decisions that were involved in it, I can always find things that I might have done differently because I have no rule that can tell me what I should have done there.\(^{128}\) Furthermore, I am also now involved in this situation insofar as I will have to worry about the future. I will have to decide whether this is a likely a one-time incident or whether I need to take further steps to permanently protect the child from the adult in question.

In other words, the history of how I came to do certain things as well as my obligations for future action can never be thought as absolutely regulated (i.e. regulated in its totality, and thus as a totality) by general norms. There is always a singularity to my actions in each moment, which allow for however slight variations. It is these slight variations that can be thought of as one concrete indication of the singularity of myself in a situation that is itself always singular and thus resists any perfect repetition either in time or in the form of a conceptual and normative ideality. The concrete can never be

\(^{128}\) And importantly these moments of undecidability are not merely, as it were, instrumental such that I know unambiguously what I want to achieve, but merely have to figure out the best way to get there. Rather, I must consider the singularity and my relation to all the parties involved at each step of the way.
subsumed under the abstraction of general categories. And importantly, the concrete is here precisely not that which is simply given, in the flesh as it were, but that which resists any full appropriation through my categories or the conscious experiences through which I constitute myself. It is always singularly other, which, as we saw above, precisely means it is singularly other at each moment in time without the chance of any complete gathering into a whole. We can then see undecidability as something that must be thought to accompany all my actions and deliberations insofar as they unfold in time.

Now the question of time is crucial here, because it leads us from the argument from particularity (i.e. that the singularity of a temporally unfolding situation cannot be fully subsumed under general rules) to the argument from responsibility (namely that we cannot account for the experience of responsibility without allowing for the experience of undecidability). We can see how this is the case if we consider another possible objection.

Somebody might indeed admit what I just described as the need to go through moments of undecidability as soon as we find ourselves in a concrete morally charged situation. However, all that this seems to show is there is always some undecidability at the time insofar as we must always make some decisions or take some actions without having enough time to reflect and in the absence of perfect knowledge. And this is indeed part of the argument here as Derrida makes clear for example in “Force of Law:” “To be direct, simple and brief, let us say this: a just decision is always required immediately,
‘right away.’ It cannot furnish itself with infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it.”129

But if this is the case, one might still insist that we can later reflect on the situation to determine whether it was the right or the wrong decision, or (more likely) in which ways it was right as well as wrong, or what would have been the right or wrong decision. We would be able to reduce undecidability through the wisdom of hindsight, and thus we would indeed precisely be able to reduce the temporal component of the actual decision. Undecidability would be momentary. When Derrida thus says that we cannot think decision and responsibility without the undecidable, this would just concern the actual practice of decision and responsibility rather than the concepts of decision and responsibility, which – it would seem – could be in principle be thought without the undecidable.

Second Argument: The Argument from Responsibility

However, Derrida resists such a possible reduction of the time of the undecidable, and it is this resistance that leads us to the second argument for undecidability, namely the argument from responsibility. This argument concerns the way in which the undecidable is not just a factual feature of all decisions and of responsibility, but how it is indeed the only way we can think a responsible decision according to Derrida. Thus, he continues the above quote from “Force of Law” by precisely entertaining such a scenario of infinite knowledge and deliberation: “And even if it did have all that at its disposal, even if it did give itself the time, all the time and all the necessary knowledge about the

matter, well then, the moment of decision as such, what must be just, must [il faut] always remain a finite moment of urgency and precipitation; it must [doit] not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical knowledge, of this reflection or this deliberation, since the decision always marks the interruption of the juridico-, ethico-, or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that must [doit] precede it.”

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130 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 255(57f.); emphases mine: “Yet justice, however unpresentable it remains, does not wait. It is that which must not wait. To be direct, simple and brief, let us say this: a just decision is always required immediately, right away, as quickly as possible. It cannot provide itself with the infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules, or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it. And even if it did have all that at its disposal, even if it did give itself the time, all the time and all the necessary knowledge about the matter, well then, the moment of decision as such, what must be just, must [il faut] always remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation; it must [doit] not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical knowledge, of this reflection or this deliberation, since the decision always marks the interruption of the juridico-, ethico-, or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that must [doit] precede it. The instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard. This is particularly true of the instant of the just decision that must rend time and defy dialectics. It is a madness; a madness because such decision is both hyper-active and suffered [sur-active et subie], it preserves something passive, even unconscious, as if the deciding one was free only by letting himself be affected by his own decision and as if it came to him from the other. The consequences of such heteronomy seem redoubtatable but it would be unjust to evade its necessity. Even if time and prudence, the patience of knowledge and the mastery of conditions were hypothetically unlimited, the decision would be structurally finite, however late it came – a decision of urgency and precipitation, acting in the night of nonknowledge and nonrule. Not of the absence of rules and knowledge but of a reinstitution of rules that by definition is not preceded by any knowledge or by any guarantee as such.” (“Or la justice, si imprésentable qu'elle demeure, n'attend pas. Elle est ce qui ne doit pas attendre. Pour être direct, simple et bref, disons ceci: une décision juste est toujours requise immédiatement, sur-le-champ, le plus vite possible. Elle ne peut pas se donner l'information infinie et le savoir sans limite des conditions, des règles ou des impératifs hypothétiques qui pourraient la justifier. Et même si elle en disposait, même si elle se donnait le temps, tout le temps et tous les savoirs nécessaires à ce sujet, eh bien, le moment de la décision, en tant que tel, ce qui doit être juste, il faut que cela reste toujours un moment fini d'urgence et de précipitation; cela ne doit pas être la conséquence ou l'effet de ce savoir théorique ou historique, de cette réflexion ou de cette délibération, dès lors que la décision marque toujours l'interruption de la délibération juridico- ou éthico- ou politico-cognitive qui la précède, et qui doit la précéder. L'instant de la décision est une folie, dit Kierkegaard. C'est vrai en particulier de l'instant de la décision juste qui doit aussi déchirer le temps et défier les dialectiques. C'est une folie. Une folie car une telle décision est à la fois sur-active et subie, elle garde quelque chose de passif, voire d'inconscient, comme si le décideur n'était libre qu'à se laisser affecter par sa propre décision et comme si celle-ci lui venait de l'autre. Les conséquences d'une telle hétéronomie paraissent redoutables mais il serait injuste d'en étudier la nécessité. Même si le temps et la prudence, la patience du savoir et la maîtrise des conditions étaient par hypothèse sans limite, la décision serait structurellement finie, si tard qu'elle arrive, décision d'urgence et de précipitation, agissant dans la nuit du non-savoir et de la non-règle. Non pas de l'absence de règle et de savoir mais d'une réinstitution de la règle qui, par définition, n'est précédée d'aucun savoir et d'aucune garantie en tant que telle.”).
I suggest that we take seriously Derrida's temporally charged language here. When he says that the moment of decision “always remains” (“reste toujours”) a moment of “urgency and precipitation” in the face of the undecidable, this should be read not just in the sense that the decision will always have gone through the undecidable at that moment. Rather, the decision will remain (omni-temporally) undecidable, or it will present us with inappropriable remains we can only mourn, even given an infinite amount of time. “[U]ndecidability,” as Derrida puts it in his “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” “is not a moment to be traversed and overcome. Conflicts of duty—and there is only duty in conflict—are interminable and even when I take my decision and do something, undecidability is not at an end.”

What Derrida resists with this notion of irreducible undecidability is any teleological account of our decision-making that would aim at a kind of Aufhebung of our temporally unfolding decision-making into the telos of the safety of a stable and indubitable form of normativity or rationality. Another way to put this is that Derrida insists not so much on a lack of causal determination to think the possibility of a ‘free’ decision and thus of responsibility, but on a lack of, as it were, rational determination. And this resistance and insistence on Derrida’s part is, I argue, undecidably theoretical and practical, ontological and ethical. It concerns the way that consciousness is only

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131 Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” 89(169): “[L]’indécidabilité n’est pas un moment qui doit être traversé ou dépassé. Les conflits de devoir – et il n’y a que du devoir dans le conflit – sont indéterminables, ct même quand je prends ma décision et que je fais quelque chose l’indécidabilité n’est pas à son terme.”

132 I put ‘free’ in quotation marks here, because it still carries strong connotations of a certain sovereign self-aware, self-legislated and self-controlling form of subjectivity that we will precisely have to question here. See above FN 101.
constituted in a relation to alterity and the way consciousness is also always a space of conscience, of an exposure to another in a process of responsabilization.

Indeed, Derrida himself sometimes marks the undecidability between the theoretical and the practical by linking the impossibility of a clear conscience to the impossibility of subjective certainty in general. He does so by drawing on the ambiguity of the French term *conscience*. The latter translates as both consciousness and conscience. Thus, if Derrida says that “sometimes” [*parfois*] we can see “immorality as the good conscience” [*la bonne conscience comme immoralité*],\(^{133}\) we should understand this against the backdrop of his claim that we cannot think a responsible decision without the undecidable. It is thus that a good conscience [or good consciousness: *bonne conscience*, T.B.], the certainty of knowing, is to be avoided “at all costs.”\(^{134}\) For Derrida, such theoretical certainty in practical matters would be an evasion of the decisive character of our decision, i.e. of the incalculability that implicates us in what is happening, and thus of responsibility. A good conscience would in fact be always the faulty experience of “the assured form of self-consciousness: good conscience [or consciousness: *bonne conscience*, T.B.] as subjective certainty.”\(^{135}\) And such subjective certainty would find its ground in a certain set of norms, norms which, as soon as we try

\(^{133}\) Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 72(71).

\(^{134}\) Derrida, *Aporias*, 19(42): “[O]ne must avoid good conscience at all costs.” (“[I]l faut éviter à tout prix la bonne conscience.”). Importantly, the French *conscience* can be translated as both conscience and as consciousness. Derrida draws on this when he specifies right away that by “good conscience” he also means “the assured form of self-consciousness: good conscience as subjective certainty.” (“la forme assurée de la conscience de soi: la bonne conscience comme certitude subjective.”).

\(^{135}\) Ibid.
to reduce their inherent undecidability absolutely, would be “nothing other than the good conscience of amnesia.”

Thus, Derrida's resistance to subjective certainty as the immorality of a good conscience corresponds to his insistence on undecidability. The latter is not only something we do experience and can discern in our moral deliberations. It is also that Derrida wants to insist that a decision is only a decision if it is something that is and that will always have been ours. This is to say that it would be something that we will always have to answer for, something for which we will have to respond in a non-automated fashion insofar as the decision itself cannot be completely accounted for with reference to a structure that would allow for a kind of automatism (be it causal or rational). And this, in turn, will only be the case if I resist the attempt to fix my decision in a seemingly given and stable form of rationality, or to reduce its finite singularity by grounding it in the universal certainty of a general system of normativity (or which could consist either in rational or natural laws).

This is why we might say that for Derrida a lack of causal determination would not be enough – and indeed that it might not even be relevant given that the exact causal chain of events is in principle only accessible to us (if at all) in hindsight and thus cannot

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136 Derrida, “Rams,” 160(74): “The ‘norm’ is nothing other than the good conscience of amnesia.” (“La ‘norme’ n’est autre que la bonne conscience d’une amnésie.”). See also Derrida, “Human Genome,” where Derrida suggests that we think of the human being as “one that at least asks itself the question of ethics, of freedom, of responsibility, where not only a norm and a knowledge of this kind are lacking, but further, must be lacking.” (199f.(146):”celui qui se pose au moins la question de l’éthique, de la liberté, de la responsabilité, là où, non seulement une telle norme et un tel savoir manquent, mais encore; doivent manquer.”). And he continuous a little further down: “[T]his lack of norm would be the condition, not only of a possible ethics of responsibility but of knowledge itself.” (Ibid.: “[C]e défaut de norme serait la condition, non seulement d’une possible éthique de responsabilité, mais même du savoir.”).
factor into our actual experience of deciding the undecidable. Above all, we need a lack of rational determination (and a full understanding of my specific causal determination, were it achievable, might indeed be one form of rational determination understood as an evasion of my singular responsibility for my thought and action). While a lack of perfect causal determination would allow me to be held responsible in an abstract sense for having ultimately settled for one thing rather than another (I could have acted differently, but I did not), it is only a lack of rational determination that will ensure that the decision will remain a decision, i.e. something I can return to as a decision, or something that opened a situation to one futural scenario rather than another.

For Derrida the idea of full rational determinability will always be a ploy to remove myself from the equation. I would remove myself insofar as I could say that while it was me who did what was done, the situation was ultimately one that should be evaluated with regard to how well it fits with certain abstract and general norms rather than in relation to the singular decisiveness of my decision. In other words, while it was me who might have acted a certain way, anyone should have acted the same way. When it comes to the rightness or wrongness of my decision (as opposed to is realization) my singularity would not matter at all. We could thus not think a decision without (rational) undecidability for Derrida because a decision is mine precisely insofar as I remain responsible for it (i.e. insofar as the decision remains undecidable) – which does not mean responsible in way that just concerns the past, but that I remain vulnerable to being haunted by this decision and by having to answer for it once again as my decision in a situation of singularity. The undecidable then is crucial for Derrida in that it is both a
pivotal part of our experience of decision-making and because it is the only way we can think ourselves as ultimately, i.e. singularly responsible for our decisions.

If Derrida insists on rational undecidability, it is because he thinks it is necessary to take responsibility for the norms we rely on in a way that goes beyond just faithfully executing norms once we have recognized as ‘correct.’ This also involves an ever vigilant responsibility for the epistemic and philosophical norms that guide the discovery of such norms – and the norms that guide these norms in turn and so on.

That the specific norms we necessarily need to rely on in order to take a responsible decision are themselves never fully established also means that each time we decide in the face of the singular it is “the ethicity of ethics” as such that is at stake – an ethicity which is “without a [general or permanent, T.B.] response,” but which must decide itself “each time” anew,137 – which is another way of saying that no set of norms

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137 Derrida, “Passions,” 16f.(40f.); translation modified: “All this, therefore, still remains open, suspended, undecidable, questionable even beyond the question, indeed, to make use of another figure. absolutely aporetic. What is the ethicity of ethics? The morality of morality? What is responsibility? What is the ‘What is?’ in this case? etc. These questions are always urgent. In a certain way they must remain urgent and unanswered, at any rate without a general and rule-governed response, without a response other than that which links itself singularly each time, to the occurrence of a decision without rules and without will in the course of a new ordeal of the undecidable. And let it not be said too precipitately that these questions or these propositions are already inspired by a concern that could by right be called ethical, moral, responsible, etc. For sure, in saying that (‘And let it not be said too precipitately’ etc.), one gives ammunition to the officials of anti-deconstruction, but all in all isn’t that preferable to the constitution of a consensual euphoria or, worse, a community of complacent deconstructionists, reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished (or, more heroically still, yet to be accomplished)?” (“Tout cela, donc, reste encore ouvert, suspendu, indécide, questionnable au-delà même de la question, voire, pour se servir d’une autre figure, absolument aporétique. Qu’est-ce que l’éthicité de l’éthique? la moralité de la morale? Qu’est-ce que la responsabilité? Qu’est-ce que le ‘qu’est-ce que?’ dans ce cas? etc. Ces questions sont toujours urgentes. D’une certaine manière, elles doivent rester urgentes et sans réponse, en tout cas sans réponse générale et réglée, sans réponse autre que celle qui se lie singulièrement, chaque fois, à l’événement d’une décision sans règle et sans volonté au cours d’une nouvelle épreuve de l’indécidable. Qu’on ne se hâte pas de dire que ces questions ou ces propositions sont déjà inspirées par un souci qu’on peut à bon droit appeler éthique, moral, responsable, etc. Certes, à parler ainsi (‘Qu’on ne se hâte pas...’, etc.), on donne des armes aux fonctionnaires de l’anti-déconstruction, mais, à tout prendre, n’est-ce pas préférable à la constitution d’une euphorie consensuelle ou, pis, d’une communauté de déconstructionnistes rassurants, rassurés, réconciliés
can by itself tell us conclusively who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ and on the basis of what or how we ought to regulate our attitudes and behavior with regard to a specific other. Our relation to decision and the undecidable is thus never simply a theoretical one, but rather concerns our existence as responsible agents (a responsibility and an agency which we will have to further rethink along the lines of passivity and dis-ability). Thus Derrida says:

I often use the expression *s’il y en a*, when I speak of our relation to choice, decision and responsibility, but this does not mean that these things do not exist or that they are impossible, it means rather that our relation to matters like choice, decision and responsibility is not a theoretical, constative or determinate relation. It is always a suspended relation. Even when I believe myself to have opted for a decision, I do not know if I have in fact taken a decision, but it is necessary that I refer myself to the possibility of this decision and think it, *s’il y en a*. I would say the same thing about responsibility and this is linked to what I said above about the ‘quasi’. We have a relation to things as they are for which a determinate or

avec le monde dans la certitude éthique, la bonne conscience, la satisfaction du service rendu et la conscience du devoir accompli (ou, plus héroïquement encore, à accomplir)?”). See also Derrida, “Force of Law,” 244 : “Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule.” (“Le droit est l’élément du calcul, et il est juste qu’il y ait du droit, mais la justice est incalculable, elle exige qu’on calcule avec de l’incalculable; et les expériences aporétiques sont des expériences aussi improbables que nécessaires de la justice, c’est-à-dire de moments où la décision entre le juste et l’injuste n’est jamais assurée par une règle.”).

138 Derrida, “What I would…,” 57f.(80): “However transitory it may be, no community can identify itself without exclusion. But it is always better to bring the modalities, the mechanisms, and, each time, the singularities of this exclusion to light. What evaluations explain them and justify them? What implicit discourse? From where does it draw its authority and its legitimacy? In this regard, the colloquium offered a fascinating field of analysis: a very great concentration in time and space; a large representation: great diversity: a mixture of genres, disciplines, milieux, statuses, etc. Great success in this regard, but still another reason to ask oneself, in view of other experiences yet to come: who and what will have been absent or excluded (individuals, groups, nations, languages, discourses)? And why? And how?” (“Si transitoire soit-elle, aucune communauté ne peut s’identifier sans exclusion. Mais il vaut toujours mieux en porter au jour les modalités, les mécanismes et chaque fois les singularités. Quelles évaluations les expliquent et les justifient? Quel discours implicite? D’où tient-il sa légitimité et son autorité? A cet égard, le Colloque offrait un champ d’analyse passionnant. Très grande concentration : dans le temps et dans l’espace. Large représentativité, grande diversité, mélange des genres, des savoirs, des milieux, des statuts, etc. Belle réussite à cet égard, mais raison de plus pour se demander, en vue d’autres expériences à venir : qui aura été absent ou exclu, et quoi (individus, groupes, nations, langues, discours)? Et pourquoi? Et comment?”).
constative truth, a constative presence, is impossible, and at the same time we are not able to renounce these things, we should not renounce them.\(^\text{139}\)

Before looking in more detail at the question of responsibility, we will now look more specifically at the role the undecidable plays in our ethical lives with regard to decision and obligation or duty.

The Undecidable, Decision and Duty

*The Undecidable as Enabling Decision*

Importantly, when Derrida says that “I do not know if I have in fact taken a decision,” this already indicates that decision, in its dependence on the undecidable, must not be thought as a simple ability or power. Indeed, we will have to rethink ethical agency in general along the lines of a certain passivity. In order to do so we will now first briefly indicate how the undecidable marks a decision as mine precisely in coming from another, and then how it enables such a decision only as the experience of a certain force or necessity to decide. Both of these aspects will be crucial later in order to think decision and responsibility as aporetic and to think agency as not simply a power or faculty of a sovereign subject, but instead as an always contextual and interactive form of being.

\(^{139}\) Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” 89f.(170): “J'utilise souvent l'expression *s'il y en a* quand je parle de notre relation au choix, à la décision et à la responsabilité, mais cela ne signifie pas que ces choses n'existent pas ou qu'elles sont impossibles, cela signifie plutôt que notre relation à des questions telles que celles du choix, de la décision ou de la responsabilité n'est pas théorique, constative ou déterminée. C'est toujours une relation suspendue. Même quand je crois avoir opté pour une décision, je ne sais pas si j'ai réellement pris une décision, mais il est nécessaire que je me réfère à la possibilité de cette décision et que je la pense, *s'il y en a*. Je dirais la même chose de la responsabilité et cela est lié à ce que j'ai dit plus haut à propos du ‘quasi.’ Nous avons un rapport aux choses telles qu'elles sont dans lequel une vérité déterminée ou constative, une présence constative, est impossible, et en même temps nous sommes incapables de renoncer à ces choses, nous ne devrions pas y renoncer.”
affected. The aspect of necessity in particular will also help us to understand the link
between undecidability and the experience of duty and obligation.

We will now first look at the way that the undecidable only enables a decision as
precisely mine (i.e. as that which I am singularly responsible for) by dis-abling it in its
propriety (i.e. as that which is simply in my control or originates from such a place of
control). This disjunction of responsibility and control will be important to keep in mind
in the second part (i.e. chapters 4 to 6) when we talk the possibility of experiencing non-
humans as possessing a certain life of their own.

Another way to phrase the quasi-transcendental (i.e. dis-enabling) character of the
undecidable is that it designates the absence, the non-knowledge and incalculability that
must be assumed to underlie the presence, knowledge and calculation of any decision, but
in such a way as to make the experience of decision itself not simply an experience of
presence or of active agency, knowledge or control, but of an excess over knowledge and
consciousness.

It is, paradoxically, only in such an excess, only if a decision is not just
exclusively based on my knowledge and my understanding, but also goes beyond any
such grounding in what I can designate as given in a situation (for example as my
consciousness of an accessible objective moral order of the world) that a decision can be
meaningfully said to be mine and that I am acting.

This again can be tied to the assumption of a lack of rational determination in
addition to the assumption of a lack of causal determination. If we would limit ourselves
to the latter, my agency would ultimately be but an attempt to reduce or to sublate itself
into a ground outside itself, namely a certain fixed set of norms and forms of
knowledge.\textsuperscript{140} And this would be a normative ground that would nevertheless assumed to
be fully accessible and intelligible to me. It would thus lack the singular alterity that, in
turn, puts me at play in my singularity. What I do or did would be devoid of any
involvement in the situation as concerns the valence of the norms I rely on.

Thus, a decision that would not involve the experience of a certain rational
undecidability would not only fail to consider our actual finitude, i.e. the limitation of our
knowledge, the weaknesses and blind spots of our psyche and the way in which I am
always caught in a web of contradictory demands between uncountable others. It would
also be an attempt to disavow the mineness of the decision precisely as a normatively
charged one. I would ultimately not decide, but just execute. Of course, we could say that
the decision to execute such a law is itself not machine-like. However, it is still
performed in view of such a machine-like execution insofar as my decision would
ultimately be fully vindicated by the kind of normativity it endorses. It would become a
‘no-brainer.’

A decision then is mine to the extent that I do not fully control or understand
either it or the process that leads up to it. If I would, the decision could be anyone’s. This

\textsuperscript{140} While the undecidable also locates agency (partly) outside myself (i.e. any form of self or consciousness
that I can simply know and control as such), the singular other in which it would be located would not be
an intelligible ground that would give my decision a kind of fixed stability. The other would be neither a
ground nor intelligible, which means that it returns whatever I do back to me as an agent, i.e. as a doer who
is not, at that moment, a knower. What I thus do makes me an agent not simply because I act upon
something other than myself, because I cause the world to change, but because what I do can never be
reduced to the mere execution of a law that precedes and grounds it.
is why I also will never quite know whether I made a decision – something we will return to below as the undecidable distinction between response and reaction.

Importantly, this lack of control and understanding is not secondary to what we control and understand in the way that I could, for example, initiate a process that is then not fully controlled by me anymore. Rather, the undecidable indicates a certain passivity at the heart of all our decisions in that I do not just decide to take a decision, but that the decision comes to us from elsewhere. This, in turn, relates to the way that the undecidable does not just have an enabling function insofar as it allows a decision to be understood as mine, but also carries with it a certain necessity – a necessity which will be important later to understand the aspect of duty and obligation coming from the undecidable.

The Undecidable and the Necessary

What makes a decision necessary in the face of the undecidable is precisely also what enables it, namely that I find myself implicated in a situation in my singularity without being able to reduce this singular involvement in a way that would make whatever I decide to do (or what I find myself doing) simply into the explication of what I know to be right and to be the case. It is my incapacity to refer a decision to something or somebody else, my unsubstitutability that makes a decision also necessary. The ‘glitch in the matrix,’ the interruption of the program (of the pre-written as the excess of writing over itself) that is the undecidable, is thus not simply what enables me to decide in a free manner. It is also what requires me to decide; it is what puts me at play in a moment of agency there where I cannot simply follow a pre-determined path – even a pre-determined path within me –, all the while also being unable to extricate myself. Whether
I take charge of the situation I find myself in or not, my first being affected by the situation in its undecidability is not something I am in charge of. And even a lack of action, a turning away from the situation would still affect the situation and implicate me in whatever happens. This implication would make me in principle responsible for whatever happens, which, as we saw above, is the defining characteristic of a decision for Derrida.

It is thus that without the undecidable, a decision would be neither necessary nor possible. It would not be necessary insofar as the course of action would already be clear, and no genuine (i.e. irreplaceable and irredeemable) involvement on my part would be required. I would merely have to apply, without risk or putting myself at stake, what I already know, thus extricating myself from the situation as responsible.

It would not be possible for the same reason, namely because it would not allow me to take a decisive or deciding stance. There would be no moment where my decision could be a genuine response to a situation rather than the realization of what I know.

*Agency as Dis-Enabled*

What becomes clear here is that the agency emerging from the undecidability must thus be seen not as simply a moment of freedom and sovereignty. On the one hand, this is because it involves the experience of necessity, which links it to obligation. On the other hand, as became clear above, agency, insofar as it emerges only from an excess over knowledge and control must be thought of as inherently linked to the experience of the limit of our subjective powers. Without such limitations, agency as that which is indicates the singular mineness of a decision for which I am thus responsible could not be
thought. As Derrida puts it in *The Other Heading*: “When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make [and, we might add, no one to make it, T.B.]: irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program.”¹⁴¹

And because non-knowledge and incalculability are the condition for any decision, Derrida holds that “I will never know that I have made a good decision.”¹⁴²

“One is never sure of making the just choice; one never knows, one will never know with what is called knowledge. The future will give us no more knowledge, because it itself will have been determined by that choice.”¹⁴³

However, what is important to remember here is that this lack of knowledge and control is not, strictly speaking, indicative of a limitation of our agency. Rather, such a lack of knowledge and control is the only way we can think agency. It is thus that for Derrida the undecidable is not the experience of finitude (of, say, our epistemic or rational capacities) as opposed to the actual possibility of an infinite (understanding or intellect). It is not the experience of a lack of knowledge, understanding and power in the

¹⁴¹ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 41(43): “Quand le passage est donné, quand un savoir d'avance livre la voie, la décision est déjà prise, autant dire qu'il n'y en a aucune à prendre : irresponsabilité, bonne conscience, on applique un programme.”


¹⁴³ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 56(130): “On n'est jamais sûr de faire le choix juste-on ne sait jamais, on ne le saura jamais – de ce qui s'appelle un savoir. L'avenir ne nous le donnera pas davantage à savoir car il aura été déterminé, lui-même, par ce choix.”
face of a situation that would \emph{in principle} be fully knowable and calculable. Rather, it is the experience of that which alone enables knowledge and calculation.

Thus, not only should the limit experience underlying decision not simply be seen as a lack of agency or an in-ability (as we just saw), but such finitude should also not be defined in relation to the possibility of an infinite, i.e. complete, knowledge or understanding of a situation. To understand better how this is the case I will now look at why the undecidable must be understood as aporetic. This will also allow us to obtain a better understanding of why the undecidable marks the experience of obligation (and not just of the ability or the necessity to decide).

\emph{The Undecidable as Aporetic in Principle}

One issue that the aporetic character of the undecidable will help us address is a possible equivocation that might be detected in Derrida’s use of the term decision. As we already saw above, decision can, on the one hand, be seen as a possibility or an active power. It can also be seen through the lense of necessity as a passive being affected or being implicated. Thus, there seem to be two notions of decision at work here. On the one hand, there is the idea that a decision does relate to a certain form of active and controlled stance-taking. This seems to be foregrounded for example when Derrida says that only a

\footnote{Derrida, “Narcissism,” 201(214): “It is not a non-knowing installed in the form of ‘I don't want to know.’ I am all for knowledge [laughter], for science, for analysis, and ... well, okay! So, this non-knowing ... it is not the limit ... of a knowledge, the limit in the progression of a knowledge. It is, in some way, a structural non-knowing, which is heterogeneous, foreign to knowledge. It’s not just the unknown that could be known and that I give up trying to know. It is something in relation to which knowledge is out of the question.” (“Ce n'est pas un non-savoir installé dans le ‘je ne veux pas le savoir.’ Je suis pour le savoir (rire...), pour la science, pour l'analyse et... bon! Donc, ce non-savoir... ce n'est pas la limite... d'un savoir, la limite dans la progression d'un savoir. C'est un non-savoir structurel, en quelque sorte, qui est hétérogène, qui est étranger au savoir. Ce n'est pas simplement l'inconnu qui pourrait être connu et que je renonce à connaître. C'est quelque chose par rapport à quoi il n'est pas question de savoir.”)}
decision is just.\(^{145}\) If we could not help but take a decision there would be no point, pointing out its justice.\(^{146}\) On the other hand, there is the idea of a decision as passive, which comes to the fore for example in Derrida’s dictum that we will never know not only whether we decided justly, but not even whether a decision took place.\(^{147}\)

In order to see that there are not two notions of decision at work here, we will now further explicate the aporetic nature of the undecidable. What will become apparent is that decision requires both elements, namely an active taking of a stance in the face of the best knowledge available, while at the same time never being certain of whether I truly decided justly or actually decided at all in a way that was not just reactive. A decision is thus just because it marks the moment both of taking stock of the best available knowledge and of exceeding it to form a genuine response. And it is in this excess where we must “plunge, but \textit{lucidly}, into the night of the \textit{unintelligible}.”\(^{148}\) The undecidable and thus decision involves both aspects, control and lack of control, activity and passivity, knowledge and non-knowledge, or the repeatable and the non-repeatable.

This is where the undecidable shows itself to be aporetic. The basic aporia that plays out in the case of the undecidable is (as in the case of the other, which is not a


\(^{146}\) Hägglund has precisely argued that many of the concepts within Derrida’s texts that are usually employed to argue for the normative charge of Derrida’s thinking (hospitality, responsibility, forgiveness) do in fact have to be understood in a radically non-voluntarist fashion. Thus, Derrida should not be understood as a normative thinker. (see for example \textit{Radical Atheism}, 35f.)

\(^{147}\) “On Forgiveness,” 62. See below FN 183.

\(^{148}\) Derrida, \textit{Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness}, 49(123); emphasis mine. What Derrida says here about forgiveness also applies to decision and the undecidable: “Forgiveness is thus mad. It must plunge, but lucidly, into the night of the unintelligible.” (“Le pardon est donc fou, il doit s'enfoncer, mais lucidement, dans la nuit de l'inintelligible.”).
coincidence\(^{149}\) the necessity to heed both the general or repeatable and the singular in a
decision without being able to reduce one to the other or to think one side in terms of the
other.\(^{150}\)

If Derrida at times refers to the undecidable as an ordeal (\textit{epreuve}),\(^{151}\) it is because
it is marked by this simultaneous, but irreconcilable, need to calculate and know (in a
repeatable fashion) as well as to go beyond calculation and knowledge (in a singular
fashion). And it is only through such an ordeal, or if a situation both \textit{requires} and \textit{resists}
calculation, that there can be a decision worthy of the name, i.e. a decision that involves
me in some way as an agent. More specifically, this corresponds to the fact that a
decision must involve an excess over laws and rules, while this excess must be thought
and experienced in a simultaneous reliance on those very laws and rules. The undecidable
does not just emerge precisely at and \textit{as} the excess over ‘the program,’ over what we
know and what we can calculate with reference to certain norms, but it also, in this
excess, is still constitutively dependent on knowledge, rules, principles and calculation.
The need to abandon any pre-determined path emerges precisely in a determined
situation. We will now look at how exactly this is the case.

\(^{149}\) Derrida in fact maintains, as we saw above, that there is only one aporia and it can always be described
as concerning the necessity of the other in the same or of the non-repeatable and non-identical in repeatable
and the identical.

\(^{150}\) Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon,” 72(34f.). See above FN 16, 44.

\(^{151}\) Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 94(126): “But at a certain point promise and decision, which is to say
responsibility, owe their possibility to the ordeal of undecidability which will always remain their
condition.” (“Mais à un certain point la promesse et la décision, c'est-à- dire la responsabilité, doivent leur
possibilité à l'épreuve de l'indécidabilité qui en restera toujours la condition.”). See also ibid. 109(144),
question of what role the ordeal or test (\textit{épreuve}) plays for Derrida conception of ethics see Gormley,
“Demands of Deconstruction.”
The Undecidable as Still Dependent on Knowledge and Determinacy

As Derrida says, the fact that at a certain point we have to go beyond knowledge “does not mean that we have to rely on ignorance and to give up knowledge and consciousness. A decision, of course, must be prepared as far as possible by knowledge by information, by infinite analysis.”\textsuperscript{152} This is, on the one hand, a question of justice, of doing justice to a specific situation. However, on the other hand, it is again a question of accounting for the necessary conditions for a free and responsible decision. Such a decision – although it must, at some point, “go beyond knowledge”\textsuperscript{153} – can in fact only emerge against the backdrop of knowledge, rules and principles – for if we just talk about a random act or position that would not involve any relations to rules and knowledge whatsoever, we would not talk about a decision either. Such an indeterminacy would be no different from blind chaos without agency or (at the most) from a certain structured chance.\textsuperscript{154} There would thus be no free response and hence no responsibility. At the same time, as we saw above, agency and decision also require a moment of non-knowledge in order to go beyond the order of the mere running of a lifeless algorithm that would be infinitely repeatable (even beyond my death).

Thus, undecidability, and hence agency understood through the moment of decision, always emerges as a singular excess over specific rules or laws on which it, however, remains dependent in the very moment of its necessary independence.

\textsuperscript{152} Derrida, “Hospitality,” 66. See above FN 112.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{154} An example of the latter would be the random mutations involves in the evolutionary process. This would be because they are (to a certain extent) random without leading to merely random or chaotic results.
general lack of determination would be as incapacitating for a decision as complete
determination. What the decision requires is a specific or determined absence of
determination, or the undecidability of a specific situation. “[U]ndecidability,” Derrida
insists in the “Afterword,” “is always a determine oscillation between possibilities (for
example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly
determined in strictly defined situations (for example, discursive – syntactical or
rhetorical – but also political, ethical, etc.).”

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in regard to ‘meaning’ or anything else. Undecidability is something else again. While referring to what I
have said above and elsewhere, I want to recall that undecidability is always a determinate oscillation
between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly
determined in strictly defined situations (for example, discursive – syntactical or rhetorical – but also
political, ethical, etc.). They are pragmatically determined. The analyses that I have devoted to
undecidability concern just these determinations and these definitions, not at all some vague
“indeterminacy.” I say “undecidability” rather than “indeterminacy” because I am interested more in
relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given
situations to be stabilized through a decision of writing (in the broad sense I give to this word, which also
includes political action and experience in general). There would be no indecision or double bind were it
not between determined (semantic, ethical, political) poles, which are upon occasion terribly necessary and
always irreplaceably singular. Which is to say that from the point of view of semantics, but also of ethics
and politics, “deconstruction” should never lead either to relativism or to any sort of indeterminism. To be
sure, in order for structures of undecidability to be possible (and hence structures of decisions and of
responsibilities as well), there must be a certain play, différence, nonidentity. Not of indetermination, but of
différance or of nonidentity with oneself in the very process of determination. Différence is not
indeterminacy. It renders determinacy both possible and necessary.” (“Je crois n'avoir jamais parlé de
‘indeterminacy,’ qu’il s'agisse de “meaning” ou d'autre chose. L'indécidabilité, c'est autre chose. Tout en
renvoyant à ce que j'en disais plus haut et ailleurs, je rappelle que l'indécidabilité est toujours une
oscillation déterminée entre des possibilités (par exemple de meanings mais aussi d'actes). Ces possibilités
sont elles-mêmes très déterminées dans des situations strictement définies (par exemple, discursives –
syntaxe ou rhétorique – mais aussi politiques, éthiques). Elles sont pragmatiquement déterminées. Les
analyses que j’ai consacrées à l'indécidabilité concernaient justement ces déterminations et ces définitions,
nullement quelque “indeterminacy.” Je dis “indécidabilité” plutôt que “indeterminacy” parce que je
m'intéresse davantage aux rapports de forces, aux différences de force, à tout ce qui permet, justement, par
une décision d'écriture (au sens large que je donne à ce mot, qui comprend aussi l'action politique et
l'expérience en général), de stabiliser des déterminations dans des situations données. Il n'y aurait pas
d'indécision ou de double bind, si ce n’était entre des pôles (sémantiques, éthiques, politiques) déterminés,
parfois terriblement nécessaires et toujours singuliers, irremplaçables. C'est dire que du point de vue
sémantique, mais aussi éthique et politique, la “déconstruction” ne devrait donner lieu ni au relativisme ni à
quelque indéterminisme. Bien sûr, pour que des structures d'indécidabilité soient possibles (et donc des
décisions et donc des responsabilités), il faut bien qu’il y ait du jeu ou de la différence, de la non-identité.
However, as Derrida says earlier in the same text, while undecidability is in a certain sense conceptually and experientially dependent on or within a determined situation and while it thus might seem to simply designate a certain “antidialectical” movement (one that would “hence” be “too dialectical”\textsuperscript{156}); and while it can indeed designate “the limits of decidability, of calculability or of formalizable completeness” “still within the order of the calculable,”\textsuperscript{157} it nevertheless, at the same time, must also be understood as “heterogeneous both to the dialectic and to the calculable.” It is only in this latter sense – in the moment that it, in an aporetic fashion, radically exceeds that which alone allows its appearance in experience – that the undecidable “opens the field of decision or of decidability.” and that it “calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility” of which it is the “necessary condition” qua excess over any “calculable program.”\textsuperscript{158}

Non pas de l’indétermination, mais de la différance ou de la non-identité à soi dans la détermination même. La différance n’est pas l’\textit{indeterminacy}. Elle rend possible et nécessaire la \textit{determinacy}.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 116 (209). See below FN 158.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.; emphasis mine. See below FN 158. This covers the first two meanings that Derrida discerns for the undecidable.

\textsuperscript{158} Derrida, “Afterword,” 116 (209f.) Derrida designates three meanings or sense of undecidability. The whole passage runs as follows: “Above all, no completeness is possible for undecidability. This, I have often stated, is to be understood in a variety of senses. For the sake of schematizing, at least three meanings can be distinguished: 1. One of them determines in a manner that is still too antidialectical, hence too dialectical, that which resists binarity or even triplexity (see in particular Dissemination). 2. The other defines, still \textit{within the order of the calculable}, the \textit{limits} of decidability, of calculability or of formalizable completeness. 3. The third remains \textit{heterogeneous} both to the dialectic and to the calculable. In accordance with what is only ostensibly a paradox, this particular undecidable opens the field of decision or of decidability. It calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition. A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this \textit{experience and experiment of the undecidable}. If I insist on this point from now on, it is, I repeat, because this discussion is, will be, and ought to be at bottom an ethical-political one.” (“Il n’y a surtout pas de
Undecidability must thus be thought aporetically as not only an oscillation between determinate possibilities, but also as an oscillation between repeatable determinacy in general and the singular alterity that exceeds it. In an ethico-political context the latter would be specifically the oscillation between inherited rules, principles, laws and kinds of knowledge, on the one hand, and the singularity of a situation and the alterity of a specific other as well as my singular relation to it/her/him, on the other hand. The central role of the other for undecidability is marked by the fact that the decision is not just the arbitration between two determinate and equally well-calculated decisions, but the impossible negotiation between the need and the capacity to calculate (on the basis of what I have reason to believe is true and just) and the resistance the singular other offers to such calculation (a resistance through which the experience of this alterity emerges as a certain absence). This is why Derrida says in “Force of Law” that

the undecidable is not merely the oscillation between two significations or two contradictory and very determinate rules, each equally imperative (for example, respect for equity and universal right, but also for the always heterogeneous and unique singularity of the unsubsumable example). The undecidable is not merely

complétude possible pour l'indécidabilité. Celle-ci, je l'ai souvent dit, s'entend en plusieurs sens. Pour schématiser, au moins trois sens: 1. L'un d'eux détermine de façon encore trop anti-dialectique, donc trop dialectique, ce qui résiste à la binarité ou même à la triplicité (cf. en particulier La dissémination). 2. L'autre définit, encore dans l'ordre du calculable, les limites de la décidabilité, de la calculabilité ou de la complétude formalisable. 3. Le troisième reste hétérogène et à la dialectique et au calculable. Selon ce qui n'est qu'un paradoxe apparent, cet indécidable-ci ouvre ainsi le champ de la décision ou de la décidabilité. Il appelle la décision dans l'ordre de la responsabilité éthico-politique. Il en est même la condition nécessaire. Une décision ne peut advenir qu'au-delà du programme calculable qui détruirait toute responsabilité en la transformant en effet programmable de causes déterminées. Il n'y a pas de responsabilité morale ou politique sans cette épreuve et ce passage par l'indécidable. Même si une décision semble ne prendre qu'une seconde et n'être précédée par aucune délibération, elle est structurée par cette expérience de l'indécidable. Si j'insiste sur ce point dès maintenant, c'est parce que, je le répète, cette discussion est, sera et devra être aussi, dans son fond, éthico-politique.”).  

159 As Richard Beardsworth puts it in Derrida and the Political in the context of the law: “Thus the aporia of law is not the other but the oscillation ‘between’ the other and determination, which oscillation is the ‘always more than two.’” (137).
the oscillation or the tension between two decisions. Undecidable – this is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule, must \([doit]\) nonetheless – it is of duty \([devoir]\) that one must speak – deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules.\(^{160}\)

The Undecidable as the Experience of Obligation

What Derrida draws attention to in the previous quote is that the aporetic alterity of the undecidable is not just experienced as (dis-)enabling (agency, decision and response). The double necessity of generality and singularity is also experienced as the necessity of what I must and ought to do as my duty (\(devoir\)). It is experienced as my obligation to face and to, as it were, own (i.e. to acknowledge and take on) the necessities

\(^{160}\) Derrida, “Force of Law,” 252(53). See above FN 24. In this sense, as Derrida says in “If It Were Possible,” the undecidable it is also marked by the other which, thus, also calls for both the new, free, unrepeatable response as well as the use of rules and criteria: “And in any case if one were to reply to the other without flinching; if one replied exactly, fully, and adequately; if one perfectly adjusted the reply to the question, demand, or expectation—would one still be replying? Would anything be occurring? Would an event happen? Or just the completion of a program, an operation that can be calculated? To be worthy of the name, shouldn't any reply have the surprise of some newness bursting in? And thus of an anachronous maladjustment? In short, should it not reply to one side of the question? Just that, and just to one side of the question? Not just anywhere, anyhow, any old thing, but just that and just to one side of the question – at the very moment when, however, it does everything to address the other, really, the other's expectations, in conditions that are defined by consensus (contract, rules, norms, concepts, language, codes, and so on), and does this with absolute straightforwardness? How can there be surprises within straightforwardness? These two conditions of replying appear to be incompatible, but it seems to me that they are each as incontestable as the other one. This is perhaps the impasse in which I find myself, paralyzed. This is the aporia in which I have placed myself. In truth I do find I am placed there even before installing myself there myself.” (77(288f.): “D'ailleurs si on répondait sans défaillance à l'autre, si on répondait exactement, pleinement, adéquatement, si on ajustait parfaitement la réponse à la question, à la demande ou à l'attente, répondrait-on encore? Se passerait-il quelque chose? Un événement arriverait-il? Ou seulement l'accomplissement d'un programme, une opération calculable? Pour être digne de ce nom, toute \(réponse\) ne doit-elle pas \(surprendre\) par quelque nouveauté irruptive? Donc par un désajustement anachronique? Ne doit-elle pas répondre 'à côté de la question,' en somme? \(justement et juste\) à côté de la question? Non pas n'importe où, n'importe comment, n'importe quoi, mais \(juste et justement\) à côté de la question – au moment même où pourtant elle fait tout pour s'adresser à l'autre, vraiment, à l'attente de l'autre, dans des conditions consensuellement définies (contrat, règles, normes, concepts, langue, code, etc.) et ce dans la \(droiture\) même? Comment surprendre dans la droiture? Ces deux conditions de la réponse paraissent incompatibles, mais aussi incontestables, me semble-t-il, l'une que l'autre. Voilà peut-être l'impasse où je me trouve, et paralysé. Voilà l'aporie où je me suis mis. Je m'y trouve mis en vérité avant même de m'y installer moi-même.”.)
I find myself implicated in as that which I owe and which I might have to responsibly own up to at a later point. The experience of the undecidable in this sense must involve both the experience of a certain duty (devoir) in the face of certain (inherited) rules or laws as well as a duty or obligation to exceed those very rules in the face of that which marks the excess of the other. And this translates into the obligation to precisely decide between the two paths, or rather to decide on the manner in which I will have to heed them both – an ordeal which can only be experienced as an encounter with the aporia of the other that we described above.

Thus, the same aporia that enables us to decide and to respond at the very moment that it disables the capacity to fully control such a response or decision is also what requires us to respond. It is what “calls for the event of the interruptive decision.” Hence Derrida’s insistence, in the above quote from “Force of Law,” that “one must speak” “of duty” (to “deliver” oneself “over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules”).

The reason that Derrida urges us to speak of duty or obligation (devoir) here derives from the fact that the experience of aporia, the experience of the radical absence of any pre-determined path, necessarily and irreducibly implicates us in or with regard to

161 Derrida, *Rogues* 35(60); last emphasis mine: “Although aporia, double bind, and autoimmune process are not exactly synonyms, what they have in common, what they are all, precisely, charged with, is, more than an internal contradiction, an undecidability, that is, an internal-external, nondialectizable antinomy that risks paralyzing and thus calls for the event of the interruptive decision.” (“Bien que aporie, double bind et processus auto-immunitaire ne soient pas de simples synonymes, ils ont en commun, justement, et en charge, plus qu’une contradiction interne, une indécidabilité, c’est-à-dire une antinomie interne-externe non dialectisable qui risque de paralyser et appelle donc l’événement de la décision interruptrice.”). See also Naas, *Derrida from now on*, 133.

162 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 252(53); emphasis mine. See above FN 160.
what we experience. As we already saw above, it is only as such a necessary implication that the possibility of agency can be experienced. It is because the experience of aporia as the undecidable marks the disabling of the possibility of simple repetition that we can both experience agency in these moments, but also an impossibility to extricate ourselves from the situation without having been a part of it.

And it is also because I cannot draw on any general rule to decide my stance in such a situation that I can find myself as singularly responsible in a situation in a way that does not allow for substitution. It is precisely because of this implication as a singular agent that we also must respond in one way or another. Whatever we decide, even if we ‘walk away,’ the experience of the aporetic will have implicated us in an event that exceeds automaticity and for which we are thus in principle responsible as a free (although not sovereign) agent. And it is this moment of free decision, and of the being held singularly responsible that it enables, which marks an undecidable moment as a moment of obligation, an obligation coming from an aporetic other and from a future other.

It is not just necessary that I respond (in the sense that I will respond and will have responded in one way or another), it is also that I must recognize that the response or the decision that is called for by the other is going to be singularly mine (singularly mine also in the repeatable norms I choose to rely on). In this singularity my decision is thus a free (i.e. non-sovereign and non-determined) engagement with necessity. What is introduced in this engagement is the possibility of introducing a critical distance between the abstract and repeatable necessity to respond – i.e. one way or another I will respond in
not fully determinate ways to whatever situation I find myself in – and the singular, non-repeatable ways in which I actually do and do not respond – i.e. a response insofar I can come to understand it as mine and as open-ended. In other words, my involvement in a situation (i.e. my necessary being part of it) is also always an engagement (insofar as it can come to be understood as a certain normatively guided decision of the undecidable).

Importantly, the fact that some response is always necessary means that my actual, singular response must not necessarily be understood or recognized by me at the time (either in its singular decision of the undecidable or in the way it is normatively guided) nor that it must be made deliberately and after careful reflection. Rather, this singular involvement with necessity indicates that it is always possible to own up to what I did. And at this moment I would recognize this necessity as not indicating the inevitable determinism of a particular response, but as the necessity to give some response, a response that cannot be decided in advance but must involve me as a singular agent. It is precisely at this moment of recognizing the possibility of my singular engagement with this necessity to decide the undecidable that this engagement becomes the experience of an obligation, of something I have to do, but have to do as a free and thus responsible agent. Obligation here would, “like every duty,” be “correlative” to a form of “freedom”¹⁶³ – although, as we will see in a moment, this would not be a sovereign freedom.

¹⁶³ When talking about the obligation (Verpflichtung) that Heidegger sees in philosophy insofar as it is creative (schöpferisch), Derrida writes that “[t]his obligation is, like all duty, the correlative of a freedom” (Beast and Sovereign, II, 112(169): “Cette obligation est corrélative, comme tout devoir, d’une liberté”).
The difference between necessity and obligation (which we could draw at least in theory although it would be undecidable in our lived experience) would lie in the fact that in the experience of obligation or duty I experience the undecidable, and thus that there are different options, while necessity would refer to the fact that I will always be forced to realize one of these options. If we thus “must speak”\textsuperscript{164} of duty, it is because responsibility requires both that I will have acted and acted singularly, but also that I acted in a situation that called upon me to act in some way, a situation that did not allow for substitution and that thus ties me to something that I now must own up to.

At such a moment, I am obligated to invent the new, the other. On the one hand, I must do so without simply controlling such an invention. On the other hand, we must still relate the situation to inherited rules and norms, even as we lack any clear knowledge of how to construct such a relation. The latter aspect of the obligation derives from the fact that it is only through such concepts that we can concretely think or positively experience obligation. Furthermore, it is only through such a relation that we can exert some kind of control over a situation such that it would not be reduced to chaos.

*The Aporia of Decision: Another Sovereignty, Another Freedom.*

As we already begin to see here, responsibility is crucially linked for Derrida to both the experience of obligation as well as the moment of the aporetically free decision. However, before addressing the question of responsibility in more detail, I want to focus a bit more on the way that Derrida's insistence on the aporetic is linked to a rethinking of decision, freedom and agency as not simply abilities nor moments of sovereignty (and

knowledge). Instead they would be constitutively affected by a certain passivity (and non-knowledge). This will be crucial in order to understand Derrida's take on responsibility. It also indicates that the lesson to be drawn from Derrida conception of ethics is not that we merely or primarily need to reflect more carefully on our actions and obligations. Rather, it indicates that an important aspect of just and responsible behavior is to create spaces (which would also have to be a socio-political effort) where we open ourselves to being affected by others in ways we cannot fully predict or control.

Derrida injects the above-mentioned notions traditionally linked to ethics (decision, freedom, agency, but also ability and sovereignty) with a certain differing-deferring of their own aspects of presence and control. And he does so by relying on the very way we usually conceive of a free decision, namely as involving both a relation to knowledge and general rules as well as a certain independence from such knowledge and rules. In a free decision I rely on knowledge and rules for the decision not to be random, but if I am criticized for making a certain decision I cannot just point to certain facts and principles; I need to account for the fact that I adopted certain principles and rules to draw certain conclusions.

However, what Derrida shows is that these two elements cannot be linked in any permanent fashion insofar as they undo each other. At the same time, both aspects are necessary to think a free decision. Thus, the general and the singular make a free decision both possible (in conjunction with the other aspect) and impossible (insofar as they exclude precisely such a conjunction). This is why at the moment of decision we must not simply consider both sides in order to reach a final conclusion, but oscillate between the
two sides\textsuperscript{165} in an irresolvable ordeal that alone can give us an experience of freedom – but only of a freedom that defers the certainty of self-knowledge, as the latter would require the security of a justified stopping point of the oscillation.

“[S]ubjective certainty”\textsuperscript{166} is infinitely deferred because no matter where I turn in this oscillation, whether to the general or the singular (and no matter to which aspect or constituent of the general and the singular), for both sides I am free precisely to the extent that I am not – which is why the oscillation between both sides is necessary. A free decision must decide its own mode of instantiation vis-a-vis the singular and the general in the absence of knowledge, considering both at each moment, but without being able to do so at the same time. While the excess over the program of rules and knowledge puts me at play in my singularity without any rational or conceptual predetermination, this excess comes precisely from and as the other. This means that I am not in control of what form exactly this excess takes and that I am not able to understand it. Contrariwise, abiding by certain rules and relying on knowledge will allow me the experience of control. However, in the simple following of a given path it precisely lacks the element of singularity and freedom and thus what I think of as my control would precisely not be mine.

In insisting on this aporia, Derrida, tentatively and strategically, decouples the notion of freedom from the notion of sovereign control, or, in a different vein, the notion

\textsuperscript{165} In fact, the assumption of just two sides is already an abstraction (of a division into the general and the knowable, on the one hand, and the singular and un-knowable, on the other hand). There are always multiple norms and ways of interpreting those norms as well as multiple parties to be considered.

\textsuperscript{166} Derrida, Aporias, 19(42). See above FN 134.
of sovereignty from the notion of power (*pouvoir*) and control. More precisely, he indicates that insofar as we want to think freedom and sovereignty together we need to think their relation aporetically. This emphasis on aporia rather than complete dissociation is necessary because, as Derrida remarks in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, “Freedom [or liberty: *liberté,*167 T.B.] and sovereignty are, in many respects, indissociable concepts.” Thus, Derrida continues, “we can't take on the concept of sovereignty without also threatening the value of freedom [*liberté*].”168

167 While the translation of *liberté* as ‘liberty’ that Bennington proposes is no doubt justified by the political context of sovereignty in which the term is deployed, Derrida's engagement with subjectivity, ethics and auto-affection in relation to sovereignty in *Beast and Sovereign* certainly also allows for its translation as ‘freedom.’ Derrida says: “There are different and sometimes antagonistic forms of sovereignty, and it is always in the name of one that one attacks another: for example (we were alluding to this earlier), it is in the name of a sovereignty of man, or even of the personal subject, of his autonomy (for autonomy and freedom [*liberté*] are also sovereignty, and one cannot without warning and without threatening by the same token all liberty or freedom [*liberté*], purely and simply attack the motifs or the rallying cries of independence, autonomy, and even nation-state sovereignty, in the name of which some weak peoples are struggling against the colonial and imperial hegemony of more powerful states).” (I, 76(114); translation modified: “Il y a des formes différentes et parfois antagonistes de souveraineté; et c'est toujours au nom de l'une qu'on s'en prend à l'autre; c'est par exemple, nous y avons fait allusion, au nom d'une souveraineté de l'homme, voire du sujet personnel, de son autonomie (car l'autonomie et la liberté, c'est aussi la souveraineté et on ne peut sans crier gare, et sans menacer du même coup toute liberté, attaquer purement et simplement les motifs ou les mots d'ordre de l'indépendance, de l'autonomie, et même de la souveraineté état-nationale au nom de laquelle certains peuples faibles luttent contre l'hégémonie coloniale ou impériale d'États plus puissants).”).

168 Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 301ff.(401ff.); translation modified: “For we must not hide from ourselves that our most and best accredited concept of ‘liberty,’ autonomy, self-determination, emancipation, freeing, is indissociable from this concept of sovereignty, its limitless ‘I can,’ and thus from its all-powerfulness, this concept to the prudent, patient, laborious deconstruction of which we are here applying ourselves. Freedom [or liberty: *liberté*, T.B.] and sovereignty are, in many respects, indissociable concepts. And we can't take on the concept of sovereignty without also threatening the value of liberty. So the game is a hard one. Every time, as seems to be the case here, at least, we appear to be criticizing the enclosure, the fences, the limits, and the norms assigned to the free movement of beasts or the mentally ill, we risk doing it not only in the name of liberty but also in the name of sovereignty. And who will dare militate for a freedom of movement without limit, a liberty without limit. And thus without law? For anybody, any living being, human or not, normal or not, citizen or not, virtual terrorist or not. The double bind is that we should deconstruct, both theoretically and practically, a certain political ontotheology of sovereignty without calling into question a certain thinking of freedom [*liberté*] in the name of which we put this deconstruction to work. Which supposes a quite different thinking of freedom [*liberté*]: on the one hand, a freedom [*liberté*] that binds itself, that is bound, heteronomically, precisely to the injunctions of this double bind, and therefore, on the other hand, responsibly putting up with...this difficult but obvious fact: namely that the choice and the decision are not between indivisible sovereignty and indivisible non-
Nevertheless, what Derrida aims at – in a movement that he describes as a “double bind” – is precisely “to deconstruct, both theoretically and practically, a certain political ontotheology of sovereignty without calling into question a certain thinking of freedom [liberté] in the name of which we put this deconstruction to work.” This, he says, “supposes a quite different thinking of freedom [liberté],” as well as a different thinking of sovereignty. The latter (just like the former) would have to be rethought along the lines of aporia because sovereignty, the concept of sovereignty available to us “has always given itself out to be indivisible, and therefore absolute and unconditional,” while Derrida aims to think a manifoldly divided sovereignty, or “economies of a divisible sovereignty,”¹⁶⁹ which would always defer its own realization and only exist precariously in a movement of aporia.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
It is in line with such a rethinking of freedom and sovereignty that Derrida develops an aporetic conception of decision as also passive, as not simply something we do, but also something that happens, that happens as much to us and in our absence and coming from the other as it happens in our presence and through us. As Derrida puts it, again in *The Beast and the Sovereign:*

Because every decision (by its essence a decision is exceptional and sovereign) must escape the order of the possible, of what is already possible and programmable for the supposed subject of the decision, because every decision worthy of the name must be this exceptional scandal of a passive decision or decision of the other, the difference between the deciding decision and the undecided decision itself becomes undecidable, and then the supposed decision, the exceptionally sovereign decision looks, like, two peas in a pod, just like an indecision, an unwilling *[non-volonté]*, a nonfreedom [or nonliberty, T.B.], a nonintention, an unconsciousness and an irrationality, etc.\(^\text{170}\)

What becomes apparent here is that a decision is experienced as passive and not simply sovereign not insofar as it would come from an identifiable other. If this was the case, we would not be responsible for the decision because it would only be something we undergo. Instead, the aporetic alterity at the heart of a free decision disturbs a decision's ‘mineness’ insofar as I cannot make it fully consciously present as mine. The alterity affecting the decision remains thus without identity as it is precisely experienced as what resists conscious appropriation – although, as we saw above, an identifiable other that can

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\(^{170}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, I, 33(60): “Toute décision (par essence une décision et exceptionnelle et souveraine) devant échapper à l'ordre du possible, du déjà possible et programmable pour le sujet supposé de la décision, toute décision digne de ce nom devant être ce scandale exceptionnel d'une décision passive ou d'une décision de l'autre, alors la différence entre la décision décidante et la décision indécise devient elle-même indécidable, et alors la décision supposée, la décision exceptionnellement souveraine ressemble, comme une goutte d'eau, à une indécision, à une non-volonté, à une non-liberté, à une non-intention, à une in-conscience et à une irrationalité, etc.; et alors le supposé sujet souverain commence, par une invincible attraction, à ressembler à la bête qu'il est supposé s'assujettir (et l'on sait désormais, nous l'avons souvent vérifié et encore la dernière fois, qu'à la place de la bête on peut mettre, dans cette même hiérarchie, l'esclave, la femme, l'enfant).”
induce such an experience. What alterity then indicates in this context is that a decision's precise location and origin escapes both my immediate consciousness (hence a decision is often experienced as a sudden event after often several repetitions of the same facts and principles) as well as theoretical analysis (because of its aporetic nature).

This is reflected in Derrida's insistence on our inability to strictly distinguish (i.e. draw a conceptually or experientially clear line\(^{171}\)) or, we might say, on the undecidability between the sovereign decision and the absence of decision. This in turn corresponds to what Derrida says about our inability to ever know with certainty whether or to what extent a free response was also or only a reaction. Derrida asks in *The Animal that therefore I am* “what would ever distinguish the response, in its total purity, the so-called free and responsible response, from a reaction to a complex system of stimuli?”\(^{172}\)

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\(^{171}\) And to say in this way that we never know if there was a decision or not would have to be distinguished from claiming (with certainty) that there is no such thing as a decision. While the former would ensure permanent self-reflectivity and responsibility, the latter would indicate the utter lack of responsibility. Thus Derrida says the following in *Beast and Sovereign* in the context of the undecidability between reaction and response: “Once more, it is not a question here of erasing all the difference between what we call reaction and what we commonly call response. The point is not to confuse what happens when one presses a computer key and what happens when one asks a question of one's interlocutor...My reservation bears only on the purity, rigor, and indivisibility of the frontier that separates, already among 'us humans,' reaction from response: and consequently the purity, rigor, especially the indivisibility of the concept of responsibility – and consequently the concept of sovereignty, which depends on it.” (I, 118f./167f.: “Une fois encore, il ne s'agit pas ici d'effacer toute différence entre ce que nous nommons réaction et ce que nous nommons couramment réponse. Il ne s'agit pas de confondre ce qui se passe quand on appuie sur une touche d'ordinateur et ce qui se passe quand on pose une question à l'interlocuteur...Ma réserve porte seulement sur la pureté, la rigueur et l'indivisibilité de la frontière qui sépare, déjà chez 'nous-les-hommes,’ la réaction de la réponse; et par conséquent la pureté, la rigueur, l'indivisibilité surtout du concept de responsabilité – et par conséquent du concept de souveraineté qui s'y tient.”). Thus, while Derrida could account for the temptation of a certain crude naturalism (crude in the sense that it simply erases one of the poles of, say, the nature-culture or body-mind distinction rather than rethinking both sides of the divide), he would never subscribe to such a reductionist naturalism.

\(^{172}\) Derrida, *The Animal*, 53f.(81): “But can we, for our part, reply to the question ‘But as for me, who am I?’ And what would ever distinguish the response, in its total purity, the so-called free and responsible response, from a reaction to a complex system of stimuli?” (“Mais pouvons-nous répondre, nous, à la question ‘Mais moi, qui suis-je?,’ et qu'est-ce qui distinguera jamais, en toute pureté, la réponse – dite libre
Similar to the way that this question arises for decision as the aporetic need to heed both the repeatable generality of inherited rules and principles as well as their singular application or breaching, in the case of response/reaction Derrida links the impossibility to strictly distinguish the two to the problem of iterability. He writes that none of the classical authors he considers in the context of the animal question (in particular, Descartes, Heidegger and Lacan) ever considered “the question of how an iterability that is essential to every response, and to the ideality of every response, can and cannot fail to introduce nonresponse, automatic reaction, mechanical reaction into the most alive, most ‘authentic,’ and most responsible response”\textsuperscript{173}

This is again an aporetic set-up. It is not that something was \textit{either} a clear response \textit{or} a clear reaction, but that we do not know which one it was. It is, so to speak, a case of ‘Derrida's cat’ where Derrida does not know whether the way he engaged with his cat was dead or alive, whether his reaction/response assumed her to be dead or alive (i.e. singular). What we do must, at the same time, is to be reliant on repetitive (dead) structures and open to the event of the singular (alive).\textsuperscript{174}

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\textsuperscript{173} Derrida, \textit{The Animal}, 112(154): “What never even crosses the mind of any of the thinkers we are listening to or will listen to here on the subject of the response, from Descartes to Lacan, is the question of how an iterability that is essential to every response, and to the ideality of every response, can and cannot fail to introduce nonresponse, automatic reaction, mechanical reaction into the most alive, most “authentic,” and most responsible response.” (“Sans que jamais soit même effleurée, chez aucun des penseurs que nous écoutons ou écouterons ici au sujet de la réponse, de Descartes à Lacan, la question de ce qu'une itérabilité essentielle à toute réponse, à l'idéalité de toute réponse, peut et ne peut pas ne pas introduire de nonréponse, de réaction automatique, de machinique réaction dans la réponse la plus vivante et la plus ‘authentique,’ la plus responsable.”).

\textsuperscript{174} It should also be remarked here that the distinction between live and death is itself undecidable for Derrida. One manifestation of this is that we could also mark the singular as death (insofar as it marks that which is irrevocably absent to our consciousness) and the general and repeatable as life (insofar as it can...
Thus, the decision (and the response to singularity that it always is) is not only not something I can sovereignly bring about through a fully controlled power I employ, and it is not only something that must be taken without a full cognitive and epistemic grasp of the situation, it is also something that is itself resistant to being known. Thus, it is not just that a decision and a response are not simply an act of knowledge and control, it is also that the taking responsibility for this act (at the moment of decision or at a later point) is not simply a moment of knowledge and control. It is itself a further dis-enabled decision and response. What we begin to see here is Derrida's notion of being “responsible without autonomy,”175 which we explain further now.

Responsibility

*The Aporia of Responsibility*

Derrida's notion of responsibility is not just dependent on the notion of the dis-enabled decision and response as that which introduces accountability. It is also itself affected by the aporetic structure that characterizes decision and response. Thus, our lack of knowledge of whether a response is not also a reaction is also our lack of knowledge of whether a response was responsible, i.e. whether it was just (in the sense that it singularly related to another in light of general norms: it was free and heeded its obligations).

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175 Derrida, “Eating Well,” 261(275), where Derrida talks about “that ‘yes, yes’ that answers before even being able to formulate a question, that is responsible without autonomy, before and in view of all possible autonomy of the who-subject, etc.” (“ce ‘oui, oui’ qui répond avant même de pouvoir former une question, qui est responsable sans autonomie, avant et en vue de toute autonomie possible du qui-sujet, etc.”).
This is why Derrida at times seems to equate the problem of the distinction between reaction and response with the question of responsibility. In the 2002 interview “Responsibility – Of the Sense to Come” puts it thus: “[N]othing will ever be able to guarantee us, by means of a theoretical knowledge and a determinate judgment certain of themselves, that my response, that the response given, that the responsibility that is assumed, is of the order of responsibility and not reaction; that is, nothing will ever be able to guarantee us that some reaction is not entering into the so-called human response.”

Responsibility is hence rethought along the same lines as decision: Just as a decision is not simply ours, responsibility emerges precisely at the point where the limit between freedom and non-freedom, sovereignty and non-sovereignty, decision and non-decision, response and reaction, and knowledge and non-knowledge becomes undecidable. My relation to the aporetic moment of decision, which would mark my responsibility for the decision, is itself aporetically structured.

It is because of this aporetic structure of undecidability we find at work in the notion of responsibility that Derrida, at one point, characterizes responsibility as the need to negotiate between two kinds of responsibility – a negotiation which corresponds to the above-mentioned aporia between inherited rules and laws and an excess over such rules and laws.

176 Derrida, “Responsibility,” 82f.(196): “[D]ans la logique de ce que j’ai dit jusqu’ici, rien ne pourra jamais nous garantir, dans un savoir théorique et un jugement déterminant sûrs d’eux-mêmes, que ma réponse, que la réponse apportée, que la responsabilité assumée est de l’ordre de la responsabilité et non pas de la réaction; c’est-à-dire qu’il n’entre aucune réaction dans la réponse dite humaine.”
Such an aporetic negotiation would gesture towards a “responsibility...for/of/in [du] the sense to come.” In the above-mentioned interview with Jean-Luc Nancy of the same title (Responsabilité – du sens à venir) Derrida says thus: “If there is a responsibility, it is no longer that of this tradition, a responsibility that implies intentionality, subjectivity, will, a conscious I, freedom, autonomy, sense, and so on. It is a question of another responsibility and thus of a radical mutation in our experience of responsibility.”

This would be the responsibility I must take for what I do not fully

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177 Ibid., 68 (178f.): “The aporia in which we find ourselves is indeed an aporia concerning (I keep on referring to the title of our session) the ‘responsibility – for/of/in the sense to come.’ If there is a responsibility, it is no longer that of this tradition, a responsibility that implies intentionality, subjectivity, will, a conscious I, freedom, autonomy, sense, and so on. It is a question of another responsibility and thus of a radical mutation in our experience of responsibility. Now the difficulty, naturally, the historical, ethical, political, juridical challenge we face, is that we must negotiate... we must negotiate..., strategically, in a given situation, between two exigencies of responsibility: the traditional one, which we must exercise all the time, and the other, which may seem, when compared with the first, uncontrollable, incomprehensible, unassimilable, but which is no less imperative for those who are sensitive to the injunction of thought. We must negotiate, every day, at every moment, between these two logics, which are not both logics of the same [même] responsibility, but “logics” (without logic) of responsibility it self [même]. It is thus a question of the same or of the itself [du même], of ipseity (metipsissimus, meisme), and thus of the possible as power [or being-able-to: pouvoir, T.B.]. The responsibility to be assumed is and must remain incalculable, unpredictable, unforeseeable, non-programmable. Everyone, at every moment – and it’s here that there’s responsibility – must invent, not only for him or herself every day, but for him or herself each time anew, the responsibility he or she must assume in any given situation by negotiating between two seemingly incompatible worlds of responsibility.” ("L’aporie dans laquelle nous sommes est bien une aporie concernant (je me réfère toujours au titre de notre séance) la “responsabilité – du sens à venir.” S’il y a une responsabilité, elle n'est plus du tout celle de cette tradition impliquant intentionnalité, subjectivité, volonté, moi conscient, liberté, autonomie, sens, etc., il s'agit d'une autre responsabilité et donc d'une mutation radicale dans notre expérience de la responsabilité. Alors, la difficulté, naturellement, la gageure historique, éthique, politique, juridique, dans laquelle nous sommes, c'est qu'il nous faut négocier...: c'est qu'il nous faut négocier..., stratégiquement, dans une situation donnée...entre deux exigences de responsabilité, la classique, que nous avons à exercer tout le temps, et l'autre, qui peut paraître, au regard de la première, sauvage, incompréhensible, irréductible, non intégrable..., mais qui n'en est pas moins impérative, pour ceux qui sont sensibles à l'injonction de penser. Nous devons négocier, tous les jours, à chaque instant, entre ces deux logiques, qui ne sont pas toutes les deux des logiques de la même responsabilité, mais qui sont des “logiques” (sans logique) de la responsabilité même. Question du même, et de l’ipséité (metipsissimus, meisme), donc du possible comme pouvoir... La responsabilité à prendre est, elle doit rester incalculable, imprédictible, imprévisible, non programmable. Chacun, à chaque instant – c'est là qu'il y a responsabilité –, doit inventer, non seulement pour lui tous les jours, mais pour lui chaque fois de façon nouvelle, sa responsabilité à prendre dans telle ou telle situation en négociant entre deux mondes de la responsabilité apparemment incompatibles.").
know, not fully understand and not fully control. It is the responsibility I would take passively for a passive decision, but a responsibility and a decision that in this passivity become mine to take or that call upon me to own up to them and that thus are not entirely passive.

However, at the same time, in the current historical context, i.e. given our situation of inheritance, “we must negotiate.” “We must negotiate...,” Derrida continues, “between two exigencies of responsibility: the traditional one, which we must exercise all the time, and the other, which may seem, when compared with the first, uncontrollable, incomprehensible, irreducible, unassimilable, but which is no less imperative for those who are sensitive to the injunction of thought.”

While we must rely on the traditional notion(s) of responsibility within politics, law, philosophy and our everyday lives to give a concrete determinate sense to responsibility and to have a public discourse on responsibility, the singular undecidable moments in which the need to act responsibly arises obliges us to also exceed this understanding and these determinations. These are the moments that enable us to challenge the consensus on both the extent and the nature of our responsibilities, which are always both less limited and less determinate, respectively, than we know. Hence, paradoxically, we can challenge inherited notions of responsibility, i.e. own up to and unearth the responsibility we always already have for our inherited concepts, our actions and decisions precisely insofar as the extent of our responsibilities is not something we can know and decide in a sovereign fashion.

178 Ibid.
This sovereign fashion, this presumed power [pouvoir] with which we employ some of our inherited concepts and categories in our all-too often all-too self-assured decisions can be challenged “at every moment.” Derrida continues: “We must negotiate, every day, at every moment, between these two logics, which are not both logics of the same [même] responsibility, but ‘logics’ (without logic) of responsibility itself [même]. It is thus a question of the same or of the itself [du même], of ipseity (metipsissimus,.meisme), and thus of the possible as power [or being-able-to: pouvoir].”¹⁷⁹ This insistence on the need to negotiate “at every moment” is important here insofar as one of the elements of the aporia is that it cannot be contained or delimited in any way. At each moment the generality of our concepts is answerable to the singularity of the situation and of the entities that constitute this situation. This does not mean that we consciously or in a controlled fashion engage with the singular at each moment or that this would even be possible, but that we are at each moment liable to experience such a negotiation and indeed that we can always discover in hindsight certain decisive ways in which we related to certain singular moments, entities and situations. This is part of what experience is. Being responsible would lie in the awareness that, on the one hand, our concepts and decisions are always subject to reconsideration in the face of the singular, but that, on the other hand, we would have to negotiate the terms of such reconsideration without ultimate reassurance. “Everyone, at every moment – and it’s here that there’s responsibility – must invent, not only for him or herself every day, but for him or herself

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.
each time anew, the responsibility he or she must assume in any given situation by
negotiating between two seemingly incompatible worlds of responsibility.”¹⁸⁰

And this ability for invention and negotiation, this possibility of being
responsible, of having to respond for what and how I decided, would precisely not simply
be a power. It would also be a non-power [*impouvoir*¹⁸¹ or *impuissance*¹⁸²] in that I would
never be able to conclusively exclude someone or something from responsibility. I would
never simply know or control what I am responsible for, just as I can never know whether
what I experienced as a free (sovereign) response and decision would not be a (passive)
reaction.

This is “the moment when responsibility becomes the most incalculable, infinite,
and, as a result, indeterminable.” And it is because of this incalculability that Derrida
admits: “I always find ridiculous and even obscene statements that allow one to say ‘I am
responsible here,’ ‘I assume responsibility for this,’ or ‘I am the one who decides.’ It is
an obscene presumption, a claim to sovereignty that...does not hold up before the terrible
and ineluctable aporia I have just recalled.”¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 67(178).

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid. 67(177): “[I]l s’agit du moment où la responsabilité devient le plus incalculable, infinie, par
conséquent indéterminable. J’avoue toujours trouver ridicule, et même obscène l’énoncé selon lequel
quelqu’un peut dire “là, je suis responsable,” “ici, j’assume la responsabilité” ou “je décide.” C’est une
présomption obscène, une revendication de souveraineté qui...ne tient pas devant la terrible et inéluctable
aporie que je viens de rappeler.” See also “On Forgiveness,” 62: “[N]ot only ‘I forgive,’ but also ‘I am
responsible,’ or ‘I’ve made a decision’ – that is to me not only unjustified but unbearable.” “Nevertheless,”
Derrida continues in “Responsibility,” “it is not a question, just because it is obscene, of saying that one
must abdicate all responsibility. Hence responsibility, if there is any, summons us with regard to this
aporetic situation.” (67f.(177): “Néanmoins, il ne s'agit pas, parce que c'est obscène, de dire qu'il faut
abdiquer toute responsabilité. Donc là, la responsabilité, s'il y en a, nous appelle à l'égard de cette situation
The Other as Marking the Lack of Mastery

This question of the abdication of sovereignty in the face of the aporia also returns us to the question of the other with which we began. If responsibility as well as decision and response must involve a radical lack of mastery, it is because they must always come from another (otherwise they would not be free nor do justice to the singularity of a given situation); or, conversely, the lack of mastery that makes possible response and decision as free (and thus as opening a space of responsibility) must always present itself as an absence indicating that which is other.

Without the other and the absence of mastery that it indicates I would reduce the singularity of the situation and of myself in relation to another in the situation to a repeatable, programmed pattern that excludes my agency both as mine and as free. Responsibility as rooted in the moment of deciding the undecidable must always come from beyond ‘me’ (understood as that which is present to me and in my power). As Derrida says:

When it comes, when it happens, there must be powerlessness, vulnerability. The one to whom this is happening, the living one – animal or human – must not have any mastery over it, whether performative or some other kind. And thus, in such a case, no one (no so-called subject saying ‘I,’ no ipseity) must be able to assume responsibility, in the traditional sense of the term, for what happens. Whence the aporia in which we all find ourselves when we insist on the exigency of our responsibilities, on the one hand, and, on the other, on the necessity of taking into account the singular event, that is to say, the unforeseeable event, irreducible to

aporétique.”). Being responsible in such a context would thus mean to know that one is responsible for that which one cannot be responsible for, because it is beyond my power. As Derrida puts it in a talk he gave at the European Graduate School (Switzerland) in 2004: “If I do what I can, I don’t do anything…If I take the responsibility I can take, I don’t take any responsibility. If I make the decision I can make, I don’t make a decision. So in order to make a decision, to take a responsibility, to forgive – to give also – I must do what I cannot do, must do more than what I can do” (Derrida, “Forgiving the Unforgivable.” This is from a talk held at the European Graduate School (Switzerland) in 2004.).
the concept, and so on, in a word, the event of the other, the coming of the other, or as other: unable to be appropriated.\textsuperscript{184}

Responsibility and the Question of Exclusion

Now, another way to understand Derrida's insistence on non-knowledge in the constitution of responsibility in relation to the singular other is that we can in fact be certain that whatever decision, and whatever responsibility we take and find ourselves taking, it will have been exclusionary and discriminatory.\textsuperscript{185} It is because our responsibility is in principle unconditional (i.e. it cannot be assigned any clear limit) that our actual realizations of responsibility can only occur as conditioned (i.e. as falling short or rather, put less negatively, as open in time towards a reconditioning in light of ‘other others’ that will make my past responsibilities appear as limited and conditioned).

If Derrida insists on responsibility as coming from the other and being constituted by a rejection of the good conscience as subjective certainty, it is not simply because of an abstract worry that we might have followed a pre-given path and thus foregone a free

\textsuperscript{184} Derrida, “Responsibility,” 67f.(178): “When it comes, when it happens, there must be powerlessness, vulnerability. The one to whom this is happening, the living one – animal or human – must not have any mastery over it, whether performative or some other kind. And thus, in such a case, no one (no so-called subject saying “I,” no ipseity) must be able to assume responsibility, in the traditional sense of the term, for what happens. Whence the aporia in which we all find ourselves when we insist on the exigency of our responsibilities, on the one hand, and, on the other, on the necessity of taking into account the singular event, that is to say, the unforeseeable event, irreducible to the concept, and so on, in a word, the event of the other, the coming of the other, or as other: unable to be appropriated.” (“Quand ça vient, quand ça arrive, il faut qu'il y ait de l'impuissance, de la vulnérabilité. Il faut que celui ou celle, que le vivant – animal ou homme – à qui ça arrive, n'en ait pas la maîtrise, fût-elle performative. Et donc, en ce lieu là, il faut que personne (aucun soi-disant sujet disant “je,” aucune ipséité) ne puisse assumer la responsabilité, au sens classique du terme, de ce qui arrive. D'où l'aporie dans laquelle nous sommes tous quand nous insistons sur l'exigence de nos responsabilités, d'une part, et d'autre part sur la nécessité de prendre en compte l'événement singulier, c'est-à-dire imprévisible, irréductible au concept, etc., en un mot, l'événement de l'autre, la venue de l'autre, ou comme autre: non réappropriable.”).

\textsuperscript{185} Hägglund, Radical Atheism, 78.
decision and response. Rather, Derrida worries about such pre-given paths precisely insofar as they might always, indeed always certainly will, exclude someone or something that should not be excluded (i.e. that should not be conclusively designated as unable to affect me in a way that calls on me as responsible). And while these exclusions are inevitable, responsibility, as the least violence, would consist at least in an awareness of my predicament, i.e. precisely an awareness of the predicament of all those I do not even know of, of all the other others.

Responsibility as a rejection of certainty would thus also involve consideration of the fact that in the very need to decide and to decide with regard to general categories I would not just “betray[...]” the singularity of a particular other. I would also always “sacrific[e]” “other others”\(^\text{186}\) that I exclude in turning my attention or my care to one other and not another, one aspect of a situation and not another or one set of inherited conceptual considerations and not others.

This is another reason that for Derrida, as we already saw above, “subjective certainty”\(^\text{187}\) is the clearest sign of a certain “immorality.”\(^\text{188}\) This why he says that “[f]rom the moment when I believe I know (and when I trust this presumed knowledge) where responsibility is and where reaction is, I am already in a system of assurance à responsabilité limitée.”\(^\text{189}\) It is not just a false self-assurance of limited responsibility that

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\(^\text{187}\) Derrida, *Aporias*, 19(42); see above FN 134.

\(^\text{188}\) In *The Other Heading* Derrida says that “sometimes” (“parfois”) we can see “immorality as the good conscience” (“’la bonne conscience *comme* immoralité”) (72/71).

\(^\text{189}\) Derrida, “Responsibility,” 83(196f.): “A partir du moment où je crois savoir (et où je me fie à ce savoir présumé) où il y a responsabilité et où il y a réaction, je suis déjà dans un système d'assurance à
consists in assuming I responded justly to one singular other, but also a blindness towards all the other exclusions that each response entails. And it entails such exclusions both in the way in focuses on one singular entity, situation or aspect of a situation rather than another and in the way that it, in a reactive way, deploys iterative patterns (for example concepts) that exclude certain entities or aspects of a situation from consideration. To claim that we can be sure that any concept we deploy to justify an exclusion and an inclusion allows for certainty would be to disavow my responsibilities for the kinds of norms and forms of knowledge I rely on to formulate a just response. This is because I rely on these norms in a way that is never fully self-reflected and thus cannot exclude a quasi-automatic, reactive use of these norms.

*Rethinking Our Responsibilities*

By contrast, responsibility must always involve responsibility for the very concepts that allow us to know and to calculate our responsibilities in a given situation not just because these concepts must lack ultimate justification in the face of any singular other, but also insofar as these concepts are always exclusionary. And they are exclusionary in the way they operate in at least two ways.

First, the general norms and concepts we rely on operate in such a way as to limit the range of acceptable, common-sensical and indeed rational responses available to us with regard to certain entities (‘we’ – and we will question this ‘we’ in chapter 6 – do, for

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responsabilité limitée, je sais ce qu’est la responsabilité, donc je sais ce qu’il faut faire, je sais ce que, en tant qu’homme, je dois faire et je peux faire. Ce soi-disant savoir, qui soumet par conséquent mes engagements à un savoir, mes actions à un savoir, les programme et par conséquent, au lieu d’être la condition d’une éthique digne de ce nom, il constitue la première démission. Le premier parjure et le plus présomptueux.”
instance, not talk to rocks), often to such a degree as to entirely reduce the experience of undecidability in many situations. There is often no ordeal of the undecidable in our engagements with animals on the dinner plate or during a hunting trip, nor in the way we manipulate our so-called natural surroundings, say, in building houses, highways or oil refineries.

Second, and relatedly, many of our concepts operate in such a way as to effectively classify certain of our responses (i.e. of our decisive engagements with the necessity to decide the undecidable) as free from any obligation or devoir towards that which we are effectively engaged with in our decision. They do so insofar as they constitute an epistemico-ethical framework that draws strict lines between those entities that can legitimately be thought to have a claim on us as normative agents and those that do not. Thus, these concepts function to block certain experiential possibilities (possibilities we will return to in more detail in chapters 4 to 6). In particular, they do, with regard to certain kinds of entities, block any reflection on our decisive engagement with regard to such an entity; they block any reflection that would question whether our singular and decisive engagement with such an entity (an engagement and a decision called for and forced by the entity in question) was just, right or appropriate to and towards the entity in question. In other words, based on the concepts through which we engage with the world, a large number of our engagements with the world are, at any given time, inoculated from the possibility of a bad conscience.

However, any such good conscience must exhibit a kind of auto-immunity. It cannot guarantee that the experience of the ordeal of the undecidable will remain
excluded with regard to these entities. The concepts that structure and enforce these
exclusions, in turn, cannot fully close off such an experience of the undecidable because
any concept only derives its power from its possible applications in always singular
situations, applications which, in their singularity, are thus both what enables and what
threatens any given concept. This is true even for the most basic concepts that structure
our access to the world such as nature, culture, human, non-human, subject, object,
ethics, world, response, reaction, decision, living, non-living, death etc. Indeed, the
conception of responsibility as theoretically intelligible, limited and limitable that we saw
Derrida criticize here is one of the concepts that inhibits ethical questioning with regard
to many non-human beings. It is what facilitates the notion that we have to choose
between either behaving responsibly towards non-humans or towards non-humans or that
responsibility should only be directed towards those we can understand as similar to us in
some way (e.g. those capable of reciprocity or of sensation or able to perform certain
cognitive tasks).

If I forswear my incalculable responsibility for the concepts and categories that
enable any necessary calculation and the exclusions they involve, I do at that moment
arbitrarily foreclose the possibility of the experience of responsibility that is inherent in
any singular relation to another, another that, in each case, calls for and enables a singular
and free decision and response. By the same token, I forego my responsibility for and
inherent in my relations to all the other others that my decision and response must betray.

In such a moment of seemingly full sovereign control, where I trust the concepts I
employ as self-evident, I would falsely think that “I know what responsibility is,” and
that “thus I know what has to be done.” I think “I know what I must do and what I can do as a human being. However, “[t]his so-called knowledge, which thereby subjects my undertakings and my actions to some knowledge, programs them and, as a result, instead of being the condition of an ethics worthy of the name, constitutes the first abdication, the first and most presumptuous forswearing.” As we just pointed out, this abdication of ethics in the moment of self-assured knowledge would not just consist in a forgetting or suppression of the aporia between the singular and the general that must characterize all responsibility and any free decision. It would also be an obliteration of the irreducible multiplicity of such aporetic negotiation, which, as a “single duty” and a single aporia, “infinitely distributes itself” among always other singular others.

It is in this double sense that responsibility must always resist any ultimate self-reassurance. And, importantly, for our purposes here, this responsibility for the generality of our concepts as always too exclusionary towards the singular is immediately applied by Derrida to one of the fundamental distinctions constituting the human/non-human distinction, namely the animal/human distinction: “This blind confidence in the distinction between the human and the animal, like the confidence given more generally to the distinction between responding and reacting, is not only a philosophical and scientific abdication but an ethical one.” It would be ethical both because it is an

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190 Ibid.


192 Derrida, “Responsibility,” 83(197): “C’est non seulement une démission philosophique et scientifique, c’est une démission éthique, cette confiance aveugle accordée à la distinction entre l’homme et l’animal, comme la confiance accordée plus généralement à la distinction entre répondre et réagir. Et ça, c’est toute la question de l’animal, dont tu sais qu’elle m’occupe beaucoup ailleurs, dont je dis juste un mot maintenant.”
abdication of the responsibility of thought, for our own thoughts and conceptualizations as well as an abdication of our decisive engagement with (and thus undecidable responsibility for) all the individuals affected by this blind confidence into a strict division between the human and the animal.

It is thus impossible to develop any conception of responsibility that conclusively establishes the exclusion of specific kinds of entities from the purview of ethical responsibility. What this means is also that we cannot draw a strict line between presumably neutral conceptual considerations and justifications of certain norms and laws, on the one hand, and the arbitrary deployment of power and force, on the other hand: If no exclusion can be fully justified, any acceptance of such exclusions must always be partially based on a mere act of force.193 We exclude not just because we have

193 Thus, Derrida writes in Beast and Sovereign about “the link between this right, the force of law and force tout court, the disposition of force tout court, of a force that makes right, of a reason of the strongest which is or is not the best” (I, 77(116): “…mais justement la question revient alors du lien entre ce droit, cette force de loi et la force tout court, la disposition de la force tout court, d'une force qui fait le droit, d'une raison du plus fort qui est ou n'est pas la meilleure ;… ”). See also “Force of Law” where Derrida writes the following: “Justice – in the sense of droit (right or law) – would not simply be put in the service of a social force or power, for example an economic, political, ideological power that would exist outside or before it and that it would have to accommodate or bend to when useful. Its very moment of foundation or institution, besides, is never a moment inscribed in the homogeneous fabric [tissu] of a story or history, since it rips it apart with one decision. Yet, the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law, to making law, would consist of a coup de force, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no earlier and previously founding law, no preexisting foundation, could, by definition, guarantee or contradict or invalidate. No justificatory discourse could or should ensure the role of metalanguage in relation to the performativity of institutive language or to its dominant interpretation.” (241f.(32f.): “La justice – au sens du droit (right or law) ne serait pas simplement mise au service d'une force ou d'un pouvoir social, par exemple économique, politique, idéologique qui existerait hors d'elle ou avant elle et auquel elle devrait se plier ou s'accorder selon l'utilité. Son moment de fondation ou d'institution même n'est d'ailleurs jamais un moment inscrit dans le tissu homogène d'une histoire puisqu'il le déchire d'une décision. Or l'opération qui revient à fonder, à inaugurer, à justifier le droit, à faire la loi, consisterait en un coup de force, en une violence performativ e et donc interprétative qui en elle-même n'est ni juste ni injuste et qu'aucune justice, aucun droit préalable et antérieurement fondateur, aucune fondation préexistante, par définition, ne pourrait ni garantir ni contredire ou invalider. Aucun discours justificateur ne peut ni ne doit assurer le rôle de métalangage par rapport à la performativité du langage instituant ou à son interprétation dominante.”). Nevertheless, Derrida also argues against a reductionism of force (for example through the problematic notion of brute animal force), for example when he says that “[w]e should never be content to say, in spite of temptations, something like:
to nor just because we consider certain exclusions justified. We also exclude because we can – whether we know and recognize it or not.

The Undecidability of Responsibility

However, what is important to keep in mind at this point is that this does not mean that Derrida offers us the (impossible, but maybe desirable) ideal of a truly universal ethics, free of any exclusion. As we said above, Derrida does not provide us with a specific ethical system and he would be very hesitant to state our responsibility clearly in the form of a phrase such as ‘we are responsible’ – even if it would be ‘we are responsible for everything and everyone’ – if only because this would mean we know what ‘everything’ or ‘everyone’ would refer to. As we saw, Derrida is highly skeptical of such sovereign pronouncements of responsibility that both sovereignly claim to possess responsibility as well as to know its domain. In the constant necessary negotiation between specific, identifiable and normatively framed responsibilities and the general responsibility that can emerge from each singular encounter in the world, responsibility itself becomes something that is always undecidable.

However, even though Derrida does not offer us a specific new set of ethical norms and principles here, he does allow us to understand how the current

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anthropocentric forms of ethics that clearly excludes (all or most) non-humans from the purview of direct moral responsibility are untenable. They are untenable insofar as they do not do justice to the way that we are everywhere involved in the world in ways that can become or be recognized as relationships of responsibility (and such a recognition would always be undecidable descriptive and performative or something that itself would involve our responsibility). In this way, any ethics that assumes the possibility to conclusively establish any general form of exclusion is insufficient to understand not only responsibility, but also our, human (and animal), way of being in the world. This is one way to understand the passage from The Beast and the Sovereign that we quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “So long as there is recognizability, and that which is similar and of my kind [du semblable], ethics is dormant. It is sleeping a dogmatic slumber. So long as it remains human, among humans [hommes], ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic, and not yet thinking. Not even thinking the human that it talks so much about.”\footnote{Beast and Sovereign, I, 108(155); translation modified. See above FN 4.} The unrecognizable here can be tied back to the fact that we are everywhere engaged with the world in ways that are undecidable, that call for a decision and that each time can induce the experience of a break within any good conscience (and, as we will focus on in chapters 5 and 6, any common sense) we might have established for ourselves.

Responsibility (as aporetically emerging between the repeatable, identifiable and the singular, unrepeateable) is not something that simply is or is possessed or known by someone, but it, like justice, can only ever be in the form of a possibility, a promise that
we are never certain we can keep. It never is, but only can be, always in the form of a maybe, a may-be (peut-être). And this notion of possibility would have to be understood not as a mere logical or conceptual possibility, but in existential terms, i.e. insofar the something could affect me as calling for a responsible engagement at any moment. I cannot close off any experience against becoming an experience of responsibility. Thus, the picture Derrida draws here of the world and our ethical engagements with it is not one of a perfect community to come. Rather, it is a world that constantly shifts under our feet and that at any moment threatens and potentially destabilizes any of our conceptions of ethics and responsibility – conceptions we must develop in order to act, but that we, as limited beings, also rely on in order to feel some measure of security in the face of a world that contains unlimited possibilities or may-be's (peut-être's) of responsibility. This would call for a rethinking of ethics beyond any system of stable norms and rules (be they conceived as objectively existing in the world or merely existing for a community of subjects) towards an ever shifting space of relationality that would not exist independently of what we do and that would never simply be theoretically available to knowledge and analysis. Any action in this space would be undecidably constative (drawing on certain normative patterns) and performative (strengthening the normative patterns in question, but also moving towards new, unheard-of normative patterns insofar as perfect repetition of any norm is impossible).

To conclude, we might say that Derrida attempted to present us with a notion of responsibility that does justice to the way we can find ourselves affected by anything in the world in a way that involves us in responsible manner. This is not exactly an
alternative to anthropocentric conceptions of ethics insofar as it does not aim to replace anthropocentric principles and norms with non-anthropocentric principles and norms. However, it does strongly urge us to rethink the strongly anthropocentric and historically specific notions of ethical responsibility that dominate contemporary debates and that are supported by and undergird a socio-political and economic forms of life that have objectified non-human beings to what seems an unprecedented extent.\(^{196}\) What Derrida says about humans and animals, I claim, thus also holds for humans and non-humans in general: “[t]he relations between humans and animals will have to [devront] change in the double sense of the term [i.e. of the term devoir as ‘must’ and as ‘ought to,’ T.B.], in the sense of ‘ontological’ necessity and in the sense of ‘ethical’ duty [devoir].”\(^{197}\) And we can see now that they must change because we cannot but be affected by the singularity of others (human or non-human, living or non-living). This being affected is undecidably an ontological and an ethical necessity – something we will return to in more detail in the following chapter.

To be sure, how likely something is to induce a break of good conscience is highly dependent on the kind of cultural, conceptual, axiological and institutional structures within which we find ourselves and that we can either perpetuate or break with

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196 What Derrida says about animals in *The Animal*, when here talks about the “unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal” (25(46): “les proportions sans précédent de cet assujettissement de l’animal”) can, I submit, be extended in other non-human beings as well.

197 Derrida, “Violence against Animals,” 64(108); translation modified. And he continues by saying: “I put these words in quotation marks because this change will have to affect the very meaning and value of these concepts (the ontological and the ethical).” (“Les rapports entre les hommes et les animaux devront changer. Ils le devront, au double sens de ce terme, au sens de la nécessité ‘ontologique’ et du devoir ‘éthique’. Je tiens ces mots entre guillemets car ce changement devra affecter le sens et la valeur mêmes de ces concepts (l’ontologique et l’éthique).”).
(and we always necessarily do both). In this sense, I hold that Derrida's argument against conclusive moral standards of inclusion and exclusion and his emphasis on concrete singular encounters also implies a responsibility to be highly critical of and possibly resistant to every and any structure that removes the possibility of encounter or of being affected by another, or that enforces and reinforces existing conceptual exclusions. Examples for such structures would be the Western export of waste\textsuperscript{198} and of environmental destruction\textsuperscript{199} or the still increasing removal of slaughterhouses from our minds and senses.\textsuperscript{200}

What we aim to do in the following chapter is to further explain Derrida's conception of responsibility based on his notion of the originary performative and différance. Following chapter 3, I aim to show, in chapters 4 to 6, how Derrida's texts might help us to understand the possibility of alternative and more responsible relationships to non-human beings (and in particular inanimate beings) more concretely.

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\textsuperscript{198} See for example Acaroglu, “Where Do Cellphones Go to Die?”

\textsuperscript{199} See for example the export of greenhouse gas emissions. Cooke, “Is the US Exporting Coal Pollution?”

\textsuperscript{200} See for example the rise in attempts to legally curtail the recording of undercover video footage in slaughterhouses. Carlson, “The Ag Gag Laws.” See also Oppel Jr., “Taping of Farm Cruelty.”
CHAPTER 3

THE ONTOLOGICAL SUPPLEMENT OF DERRIDA’S ETHICS

As we already began to see in the previous chapter, for Derrida, the emergence of responsibility is not a question of circumscribing a certain limited domain of our existence in the world that would be characterized by responsibility. Rather, responsibility can emerge anywhere and everywhere in our relationship to the world and to the entities we would designate as being in this world.

This takes us back we discussed above as what at first seemed like a parallel between ethics and experience, but which in fact derives from an intertwining of or an undecidability between experience and ethics. This is because any experience involves a responsible engagement, whether we are aware of it or not. It thus can at any moment turn into an experience of responsibility. There is a way in which responsibility (in the form of a may-be that precisely implicates us through a response or a decision) is inseparable from any relationship we might have to the\(^1\) world.

In this chapter I want to focus on what Derrida at one point calls “originary performativity” in order to understand the theoretical and epistemico-ontological

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\(^1\) I use the definite article here as it is usually assumed that there is only one world. However, in chapter 6 I will argue that a more ecologically sustainable way of being-with-others will require us to question the unity of the world and consider the possibility of the world as multiple or also always differing from and deferring itself.
considerations that undergird (or better: supplement\textsuperscript{2}) the above-developed conception of an unlimitable responsibility that can potentially emerge in any singular encounter. I will link this conception to what Matthias Fritsch (following Rodolphe Gasché and, up to a certain point, Derrida himself) has called “quasi-transcendental infrastructures,”\textsuperscript{3} and in particular to the dynamic\textsuperscript{4} structure that Derrida calls différance.

For Derrida the originary performative indicates the way that nothing in the world simply \textit{is} or exists independently from a certain engagement of our part – an engagement

\footnote{2} I say supplement here instead of ground or support because it is not that Derrida’s notion of unlimitable responsibility and of the undecidable strictly speaking follows from or is based on these epistemico-ontological considerations. Rather, the operation of différance Derrida outlines throughout his work undermines and makes undecidable the distinction between the theoretical and the practical, i.e. between observation, declaration and being, on the one hand, and decision, performance and action, on the other. It is an operation that underlies both what we call theoretical and what we call practical matters. Nevertheless, it is helpful to look at the operation of différance from what we call the practical and the theoretical insofar as these categories are fundamental for our understanding of the world. There is thus heuristic value to separating the theoretical (in the form of epistemological and ontological considerations) and the practical (in the form of ethical considerations). However, this is done only in order to see how both of these presumably two sides of our existence emerge from an operation or a movement that precedes this distinction – just like it precedes the distinction between the human and the non-human, nature and culture, or \textit{physis} and its others. The logic of the supplement (see also below FN 41) would here indicate that the theoretical can be seen, on the one hand, as a mere supplement to the practical considerations we developed above in chapter 1, something that merely adds something extra to the picture. On the other hand, and simultaneously, it can also be seen as a necessary supplement that alone completes what we said above.

\footnote{3} Fritsch, “Deconstructive Aporias,” 440. As Fritsch points out in footnote 1 on the same page, Derrida himself talks about “infrastructures” in \textit{Of Grammatology}, but later somewhat distances himself from this term. Transcendental structures designate the conditions of possibility for something. An example would be the way that Kant in the transcendental aesthetic section of the first \textit{Critique} designates the pure forms of space and time as the conditions of the possibility of sensible experience. By contrast, quasi-transcendental structures are structures that simultaneously are the conditions of possibility and of impossibility for something. Specifically, they are structures that, on the one hand, allow for the experience or existence of something as tending towards a discernible identity within a certain context (thus making it possible) while also inhibiting the experience of existence of this same thing as fully present and completely self-identical vis-à-vis this context (thus making it impossible). See also Hurst, “Derrida's quasi-transcendental thinking.”

\footnote{4} I refer to différance as dynamic in order to indicate that we are dealing with a structure here that changes depending in the context in which it operates and that itself marks the instability of any presumably fixed identity. It should be noted that the dynamism in question should not be seen as simple potentiality (as in the opposition between \textit{dynamis} and \textit{energeia}). This is insofar as différance, although it is not something that simply is, is not in a mere opposition to actuality, but is also something that marks the quasi-transcendental condition for everything that is as actual (which also means that nothing is ever fully actual).
which in turn marks us as responsible and relates us to the world through a certain *ought*. In the way it indicates a performative engagement with anything that we might be tempted to understand as simply given, the originary performative generalizes and radicalizes the unstable distinction between the constative and the performative that Derrida borrows from speech act theory. For Derrida, the intertwinement of these two terms indicates the more general undecidability between knowledge, discovery, unveiling and manifestation, on the one hand, and action, production, institution and transformation, on the other hand.\(^5\)

In order to account for this undecidable intertwinement, Derrida is interested in thinking an irreducible form of performativity that – like the non-specific kind of responsibility mentioned above – is not tied to specific norms.\(^6\) Rather, it would mark the

\(^5\) Derrida, “Psyche,” 12(23): “If ‘Fable’ is both *performative* and *constative* from its very first line, this effect is propagated across the totality of the poem thus generated. As we shall have to verify, the concept of invention distributes its two essential values between these two poles: the constative – discovering or unveiling, pointing out or saying what is – and the performative – producing, instituting, transforming.” (“Si *Fable* est à la fois *performative* et *constative* dès sa première ligne, cet effet se propage dans la totalité du poème ainsi engendré. Nous aurons à le vérifier, le concept d'invention distribue ses deux valeurs essentielles entre les deux pôles du constatif (découvrir ou dévoiler, manifester ou dire ce qui est) et du performatif (produire, instituer, transformer).”). See also “No Apocalypse, where Derrida construes the opposition here in terms of knowledge and action: “It is on the basis of this situation that we have to rethink the relations between knowing and acting, between constative speech acts and performative speech acts, between the invention that finds what was already there and the one that produces new mechanisms or new spaces. In the undecidable and at the moment of a decision that has no common ground with any other, we have to reinvent invention and think another ‘pragmatics.’” (392(401): “C'est à partir de cette situation qu'il *nous* faut re-penser les rapports entre savoir et agir, les *speech acts* constatifs et les *speech acts* performatifs, l'invention qui trouve ce qui était déjà là et celle qui produit de nouveaux dispositifs ou de nouveaux lieux. Dans l'indécidable *éc* au moment d'une décision sans commune mesure avec aucune autre, il nous faut réinventer l'invention et penser une autre ‘pragmatique’”).

\(^6\) Derrida, “Psyche”, 44/58f. When discussing the first line of Francis Ponge's piece *Fable* (“With the word *with* begins then this text” (8(19): “Par le mot *par* commence donc ce texte”), Derrida writes the following: “The very movement of this fabulous repetition can, through a crossing of chance and necessity, produce the new of an event. Not only with the singular invention of a performative, since every performative presupposes conventions and institutional rules – but by bending these rules with respect for the rules themselves in order to allow the other to come or to announce its coming in the opening of this dehiscence. That is perhaps what is called deconstruction.” (“Le movement même de cette fabuleuse répétition peut,
condition for any such norm insofar as no norm is simply given or fully derivable from certain self-evident premises, or – to put in Humean terms – no *ought* can be derived from anything that simply *is*. This means that the validity of any norm always involves an element of performative force. This performativity would be an irreducible aspect of any form of lawfulness or normativity and indeed any form of meaning. It would be, as Derrida puts it in *Specters of Marx*, “the originary performativity that does not conform to preexisting conventions, unlike all the performatives analyzed by the theoreticians of speech acts, but whose force of *rupture* produces the institution or the constitution, the law itself, which is to say also the meaning that appears to, that ought to, or that appears to have to guarantee it in return.” And because this institution of meaning always involves a certain force in that it can be understood as a (conscious or unconscious) decision on our part that cannot be fully justified and that is established against the interrupting force of the undecidable, Derrida refers to this as “*violence* of the law before the law and before meaning.”

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7 Whether this characterization of speech act theorists is justified is of course debatable. However, whether it is justified or not, does not affect Derrida's basic point about originary performativity.

8 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 36f.(60). For the continuation of the quote see below FN 16: “[C]ette performativité originaire qui ne se plie pas à des conventions préexistantes, comme le font tous les performatifs analysés par les théoriciens des *speech acts*, mais dont la force de *rupture* produit l'institution ou la constitution, la loi même, c'est-à-dire aussi le sens qui paraît, qui devrait, qui paraît devoir le garantir en retour. *Violence* de la loi avant la loi et avant le sens.”
As we will see, what this originary performativity indicates is that Derrida's response to Hume's question of how to transition from is to ought consists in destabilizing the distinction between these allegedly distinct realms\(^9\) (something we already broached above when talking about the emergence of obligation in the face of necessity). Because we cannot access anything as something that simply is or that is independently of our relationship to it, the experience of any form of being must always involve us – the experiencing, and indeed living, being – as taking a certain responsive and performative stance towards the world\(^10\) and anything in or of\(^11\) this world. This, in

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\(^9\) One example of this strict separation might be seen in Kant's strict separation of our factual inclinations (or, as Hume would put it, our passions), on the one hand, and the requirements of morality (accessed through practical reason), on the other hand. In another vein, we could think about Kant's initial (i.e. tentative) separation of reason into theoretical and practical in the first two critiques.

\(^10\) The world should here not be understood as a totality or even as the unattainable, but necessarily presumed, horizon of all horizons. For our current purposes, it is enough to assume a minimalist understanding of world as that which marks the alterity and exteriority of things in general (although we will have to complicate this understanding below in chapter 6). It is the datum (or given) of something other than what we consider to be ourselves, which (as we will see below (see for example below FN 63)) is also always a factum (something done or made). It is, to borrow a formulation from Of Grammatology what the trace opens as "the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing. The outside, "spatial" and "objective" exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing of the world" (70f. (103); translation modified: "…la première extériorité en général, l'enigmatique rapport du vivant à son autre et d'un dedans à un dehors: l'espacement. Le dehors, extériorité ‘spatiale’ et ‘objective’ dont nous croyons savoir ce qu'elle est comme la chose la plus familière du monde"). Importantly, the genitive in the last part of this phrase ("la chose la plus familière du monde") – which Spivak correctly translates as ‘the most familiar thing in the world” – can be read both as designating the most familiar thing in the world, but also (even though this would be a less obvious reading) as designating this most familiar exteriority that is the world. See also Beast and Sovereign, II, 88(138). See below FN 35. As soon as we go beyond this minimalist understanding of the world as general exteriority or alterity, the very alterity that first gives rise to the world also makes it impossible as a totality or as an absolute reference point, thus always leaving open the possibility for Derrida that, as Sean Gaston has put it, there is no world (Gaston, The Concept of World, 132).

\(^11\) I make the distinction between being ‘in’ and ‘of’ the world, because the experiencing subject might be seen as not simply in the world. This is because, at least for anyone working within the phenomenological tradition as well as the tradition of German idealism, the subject, insofar as it is an origin of the world, would not be in the world in the same way that other entities are. Nevertheless, it would still be worldly, or of the world insofar as it would have a necessary relation to the world. We will specify below how Derrida in particular thinks this necessary relation.
turn, as we already saw above, positions us as responsible towards the world\textsuperscript{12} – but responsible in a way that likewise is not simply determinable, but continuously calls on us to responsibly re-invent our responsibilities in each singular situation.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Originary Performativity: Time, Violence and the Urgency of Justice}

One of the advantages that a preliminary focus on the notion of the originary performative (in order to understand the mutual contamination of the theoretical and the practical) offers is that it is closely linked by Derrida to both responsibility and to différance. It this can serve as a transitioning point between the question of responsibility we addressed in the previous chapter and the infra-structure of différance we emphasize in this chapter. As concerns its link to responsibility, it is not just that every act of taking

\textsuperscript{12} It should also be noted that this would not just be our responsibility as knowers or as members of an epistemic community insofar as we have certain responsibilities towards other knowers. Rather, we would have to understand this responsibility as always emerging through and being directed towards the singularity of the thing insofar as it enters and first relates to our lives through and as this singularity. In order to be experienced at all, the thing also requires forms of categorization that erase this singularity. However, these forms, in their generality, never quite do justice to the thing and so must be continuously readjusted. This responsible readjustment, while it usually also considers and is influenced by certain intersubjectively constituted norms, also essentially involves the experienced thing in its singularity. This is insofar as it is what motivates categorization and readjustment in the first place. Another way to frame this is that in both cases (i.e. in our responsible relationships to other knowers and in those to a thing known) there is no absolute ground for our responsibility except my factual engagement both with other knowers and with the thing I attempt to know or experience. We are only responsible insofar as we are engaged both with other knowers (via knowledge's intersubjective character) as well as with the thing we attempt to know or experience (because it is the thing that we are after). Thus, we cannot limit the duty or obligation for responsible re-adjustment to responsibilities we have towards other knowers. This would already presuppose a particular conception of responsibility, one that the general conception of responsibility we developed in part I would put into question.

\textsuperscript{13} Thus, those who accuse Derrida of relativism are focused merely on the problematization of the ‘ought’ side of this pair, ignoring the way Derrida rethinks the ‘is’ side as well. This is significant insofar as relativism only makes sense against the backdrop of the possibility of an objective normative framework, i.e. if such a possibility can be made sense of. However, because for Derrida reality itself is not an objectively given space, but involves a certain performativity and an irreducible temporality, a conception of ethics reflective of this would not be relativist, but would, on the contrary, precisely take into consideration the real structure of the world.
responsibility is performative for Derrida,\textsuperscript{14} but that originary performativity is tied for Derrida to the elements of engagement, obligation, urgency and response that we linked to decision and responsibility above. This can be seen in the continuation of the passage from \textit{Specters of Marx} we just quoted, which also, not coincidentally, links this performativity to \textit{différence}.

In order to understand this passage, we also need to take into consideration the importance of time. If the violence of originary performativity is not tied to any specific meaning-constituting norms, it can, by virtue of this feature, not be anticipated or recovered in time. This is because such an anticipation or recovery (insofar as they are meaningful) would have to rely on the very norms that originary performativity first enables. In its violence, such performativity thus breaks with time understood as a sequence of present moments (which would all be, in principle, available for re-presentation), i.e. as moving towards a past that will once have been present (and that thus can, in principle, be recovered) and as coming from a future that will be present (and that thus, in principle, can be anticipated). In this resistance to any form of temporal presentification, originary performativity operates in both what we call the (recollectable) past and the (anticipatable) future as inducing a rupture within time understood as presence, marking an opening towards a future that is incalculable and that remains

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 62f.(89): “[T]he act that consists in swearing, taking an oath, therefore promising, deciding, taking a responsibility, in short, committing oneself in a performative.” (“C'est celle de l'acte qui consiste à jurer, à prêter serment, donc à promettre, à décider, à prendre une responsabilité, bref à s'engager de façon performative.”).}
irreducibly to come. This ‘to-come’ designates the very futurity or ‘not-yet-ness’ of the future that already breaks with any presence – something we might understand as Derrida’s rethinking of Husserl’s notion of protention.¹⁵

What we will also discuss in further detail below is how – in line with the above-discussed link between necessity and obligation – this break with any form of presence is both necessary and the locus of a performative engagement. In order to understand the necessity of this performative engagement I will now first look at the link between performative violence, différance, time, and justice that Derrida draws in *Specters of Marx*. We will then briefly outline how the simultaneity of urgency and alterity Derrida describes in this passage can be traced back to the operation of *différance*. We will, finally, close this discussion of the undecidability between the practical (understood through our involvement as agents) and the theoretical (understood through the ideal of detached observation) through a discussion of a passage in *Archive Fever* that returns us to the issues raised in *Specters of Marx*. This will help us to understand the way that the undecidable (which, above, we established as pivotal for Derrida’s notion of responsibility) can be understood to emerge as a future that irreducibly remains to come as another. This would be insofar as this ‘alterity to come’ resists any form of complete repetition while also conditioning the attempted movement of repetition.

¹⁵ And indeed one of the places where Derrida first finds this idea of a split present is in Husserl’s idea of retention and protention as constitutive of any living moment: “One then sees quickly that the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and expectation (retention and protention).” (*Speech and Phenomena*, 64(72): “On s’aperçoit alors très vite que la présence du présent perçu ne peut apparaître comme telle que dans la mesure où elle *compose continûment* avec une non-présence et une non-perception, à savoir le souvenir et l’attente primaires (rétention et protention).”).
Violence, Différance and the Urgency of Justice

How then is originary performativity linked to time, différance and questions of justice? After linking originary performativity to a “[v]iolence…before meaning,” Derrida continues to claim that this is a “violence that interrupts time, disarticulates it, dislodges it, displaces it out of its natural lodging: ‘out of joint.’” It is here that he also inserts an important clarification concerning the operation of différance. He writes: “It is there that différance, if it remains irreducible, irreducibly required by the spacing of any promise and by the future-to-come that comes to open it, does not mean only (as some people have too often believed and so naively) deferral, lateness, delay, postponement.”

Rather, the here and now (understood here as beyond the possibility of presentification,

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16 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 37(60). This is the continuation of the passage I began quoting in FN 8: “Violence of the law before the law and before meaning, violence that interrupts time, disarticulates it, dislodges it, displaces it out of its natural lodging: ‘out of joint.’ It is there that différance, if it remains irreducible, irreducibly required by the spacing of any promise and by the future-to-come that comes to open it, does not mean only (as some people have too often believed and so naively) deferral, lateness, delay, postponement. In the incoercible différance the here-now unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the precipitation of an absolute Singularity, Singular because differing, precisely *justement*, and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in *imminence and in urgency*: even if it moves toward what remains to come, there is the pledge [gage] (promise, engagement, injunction and response to the injunction, and so forth). The pledge is given here and now, even before, perhaps, a decision confirms it. It thus responds without delay to the demand of justice. The latter by definition is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional. No différance without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now.” (“*Violence de la loi avant la loi et avant le sens,* violence qui interrompt le temps, le désarticule, le démet, le déplace hors de son logement naturel: ‘*out of joint*’. C'est là que la différance, si elle demeure irréductible, irréductiblement requise par l'espacement de toute promesse et par l'a-venir qui vient à l'ouvrir, ne signifie pas seulement, comme on l'a trop souvent cru, et si naïvement, différemment, retard, délai, *postponement*. Dans l'incoercible différance déferle l'ici-maintenant. Sans retard, sans délai mais sans présence, c'est la précipitation d'une singularité absolue, singulière parce que différente, justement, et toujours autre, se liant nécessairement à la forme de l'instant, dans *l'imminence et dans l'urgence*: même s'il se porte vers ce qui reste à venir, il y a le gage (promesse, engagement, injonction et réponse à l'injonction, etc.). Le gage se donne ici maintenant, avant même, peut-être, qu'une décision ne le confirme. Il répond ainsi sans attendre à l'exigence de justice. Celle-ci est par définition impatiente, intraitable et inconditionnelle. Point de différance sans altérité, point d'altérité sans singularité, pas de singularité sans ici-maintenant.”).

17 Ibid.
of a framing in terms of any clear meaning) precisely emerges, surges in and breaks like a wave (*déferle*) in the movement of différence. This is insofar as this movement, as the opening of anything presumably self-identical towards an outside, rather than postponing my singular relation to another, marks this relation in its singularity. It marks it as that which I cannot avoid (hence the urgency), but which also cannot be understood or made sense of through the general (i.e. repeatable) categories of meaning through which I make sense of the world and myself (hence the singularity).

It is in this singular relation that originary performativity takes place insofar as it marks the moment where any general norm must – and we will return to the status of this ‘must’ – defer to the unavoidable singularity of the situation – something which in turn can be framed in terms of an engagement. Derrida writes: “In the incoercible differance the here-now unfurls (*déferle*). Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the precipitation of an absolute singularity, singular because differing, precisely *justement*, and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in *imminence and in urgency*: even if it moves toward what remains to come, there is the *pledge* [gage] (promise, engagement, injunction and response to the injunction, and so forth).”

And this pledge, this engagement, as we saw above, is performed necessarily, before any conscious decision, and thus – insofar as a decision must not necessarily be conscious for Derrida – *perhaps* before any decision. Hence, Derrida continues: “The pledge is given here and now, even before, perhaps, a decision confirms it. It thus

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18 Ibid.

responds without delay to the demand of justice.” This demand of justice would be the aporetic demand that I engage with that which I encounter (a situation or something in this situation) in its singularity and alterity. This would of course also mean to take account of rules and norms. However, such rules or norms could not provide any final reassurance that I am not committing an injustice to what is other.

Yet, justice requires a decision, which is why justice is always the experience of aporia. I can be certain that there is always some injustice or an aporetic maladjustment between a thing's singularity and the general categories through which I make sense of the world. However, this is precisely the source of my continued responsible engagement with that thing. If every experience, as we said above in chapter 2, is always structured

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21 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 251f.(51f.): “Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely. (At least, if the rule does guarantee it in a secure fashion, then the judge is a calculating machine.) This is something that happens sometimes; it happens always in part and according to a parasitizing that cannot be reduced by the mechanics or the technology introduced by the necessary iterability of judgments. To this very extent, however, one will not say of the judge that he is purely Just, free, and responsible. But one will also not say this if he does not refer to any law, to any rule, or if, because he does not take any rule for granted beyond his/its interpretation, he suspends his decision, stops at the undecidable or yet improvises outside of all rules, all principles. It follows from this paradox that at no time can one say presently that a decision is just, purely just (that is to say, free and responsible), or that someone is just, and even less, ‘I am just.’” (“Chaque cas est autre, chaque décision est différente et requiert une interprétation absolument unique, qu'aucune règle existante et codée ne peut ni ne doit absolument garantir. Si du moins elle la garantit de façon assurée, alors le juge est une machine à calculer; ce qui arrive parfois, ce qui arrive toujours en partie et selon un parasitage irréductible par la mécanique ou la technique qu'introduit l'itérabilité nécessaire des jugements; mais dans cette mesure-là on ne dira pas du juge qu'il est purement juste, libre et responsable. Mais on ne le dira pas non plus s'il ne se réfère à aucun droit, à aucune règle ou si, parce qu'il ne tient aucune règle pour donnée au-delà de son interprétation, il suspend sa décision, s'arrête à l'indécidable ou encore improvise hors de toute règle et de tout principe. De ce paradoxe, il suit qu'à aucun moment on ne peut dire présentement qu'une décision est juste, purement juste (c'est-à-dire libre et responsable), ni de quelqu'un qu'il est un juste, ni encore moins, ‘je suis juste.’”).

22 Ibid., 253(53). See above chapter 2, FN 121.
aporetically, it is insofar as it always “requires us to calculate with the incalculable” in order to be just. This calculation cannot wait. In this requirement for calculating that which can neither be avoided nor calculated, justice “by definition is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional.” Derrida concludes this paragraph in Specters of Marx stating: “No difference without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now.” In other words, the operation of différence always involves the experience of alterity, which in turn must always be the impossible (i.e. aporetic) experience of the singular that yields a certain demand of the here and now.

This demand, in turn, as the demand of justice, is linked by Derrida both to alterity and to the question of the future, of that which is to-come. Justice “as relation to

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23 Ibid., 244(38): “But I believe that there is no justice without this experience, however impossible it may be, of aporia. Justice is an experience of the impossible: a will, a desire, a demand for justice the structure of which would not be an experience of aporia, would have no chance to be what it is – namely, a just call for justice. Every time that something comes to pass or turns out well, every time that we placidly apply a good rule to a particular case, a correctly subsumed example, according to a determinant judgment, law perhaps and sometimes finds itself accounted for, but one can be sure that justice does not. Law is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of Justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule.” (“Mais je crois qu'il n'y a pas de justice sans cette expérience, tout impossible qu'elle est, de l'aporie. La justice est une expérience de l'impossible. Une volonté, un désir, une exigence de justice dont la structure ne serait pas une expérience de l'aporie n'aurait aucune chance d'être ce qu'elle est, à savoir juste appel de la justice. Chaque fois que les choses passent ou se passent bien, chaque fois qu'on applique tranquillement une bonne règle à un cas particulier, à un exemple correctement subsumé, selon un jugement déterminant, le droit y trouve peut-être et parfois son compte mais on peut être sûr que la justice n'y trouve jamais le sien. Le droit n'est pas la justice. Le droit est l'élément du calcul, et il est juste qu'il y ait du droit, mais la justice est incalculable, elle exige qu'on calcule avec de l'incalculable ; et les expériences aporétiques sont des expériences aussi improbables que nécessaires de la justice, c'est-à-dire de moments où la décision entre le juste et l'injuste n'est jamais assurée par une règle.”).

24 Ibid., 255(57). See above chapter 2, FN 130.

25 Derrida, Spectres de Marx 37(60). See above FN 16.

26 This link between the performative, justice, the perhaps, the future and alterity that we will trace a bit further in what follows is also laid out by Derrida in “Force of Law.” “Paradoxically, it is because of this overflowing of the performative, because of this always excessive advance of interpretation, because of this
the other” would emerge from a certain “dislocation in being and in time itself.” And doing and rendering “justice to the other as other” in this way, would be “[a] doing that would not amount only [ne s'épuiserait pas] to action and a rendering that would not come down just to restitution,” i.e. it would not amount to a sovereign, active decision that re-establishes a just order. Importantly, this justice would be tied to the experience of “the singularity of the other” as that which “comes from the future or as the future: as the very coming of the event.”

Anything that does not maintain this openness “rests on the structural urgency and precipitation of justice that the latter has no horizon of expectation (regulative or messianic). But for this very reason, it has perhaps an avenir, precisely [justement], a ‘to-come’ [à-venir] that one will have to [qu’il faudra] rigorously distinguish from the future. The future loses the openness, the coming of the other (who comes), without which there is no justice; and the future can always reproduce the present, announce itself or present itself as a future present in the modified form of the present. Justice remains to come, it remains by coming [la justice reste à venir], it has to come [elle a à venir] it is to-come, the to-come [elle est à-venir], it deploys the very dimension of events irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this à-venir, and will always have had it. Perhaps this is why justice, insofar as it is not only a juridical or political concept, opens up to the avenir the transformation, the recasting or refounding [la refondation] of law and politics. ‘Perhaps’ – one must [il faut] always say perhaps for justice. There is an avenir for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth. Justice, as the experience of absolute alterity, is unpresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history.” (256f.60f.): “Paradoxalement, c’est à cause de ce débordement du performatif, à cause de cette avance toujours excessive de l’interprétation, à cause de cette urgence et de cette précipitation structurelle de la justice que celle-ci n’a pas d’horizon d’attente (régulatrice ou messianique). Mais par là-même, elle a peut-être un avenir, justement, un à-venir qu’il faudra distinguer rigoureusement du futur. Celui-ci perd l’ouverture, la venue de l’autre (qui vient) sans laquelle il n’est pas de justice; et le futur peut toujours reproduire le présent, s’annoncer ou se présenter comme un présent futur dans la forme modifiée du présent. La justice reste à venir, elle a à venir, elle est à-venir, elle déploie la dimension même cl’ événements irréductiblement à venir. Elle l’aura toujours, cet à-venir, et elle l’aura toujours eu. Peut-être est-ce pour cela que la justice, en tant qu’elle n’est pas seulement un concept juridique ou politique, ouvre à l’avenir la transformation, la refonte ou la refondation du droit et de la politique. ‘Peut-être,’ il faut toujours dire peut-être pour la justice. Il y a un avenir pour la justice et il n’y a de justice que dans la mesure où de l’événement est possible qui, en tant qu’événement, excède le calcul, les règles, les programmes, les anticipations, etc. La justice, comme expérience de l’altérité absolue, est impréstable, mais c’est la chance de l’événement et la condition de l’histoire.”)

Derrida, Specters of Marx, 32f.(55f.); translation modified: “Beyond right, and still more beyond juridicism, beyond morality, and still more beyond moralism, does not justice as relation to the other suppose on the contrary the irreducible excess of a disjointure or an anachrony, some Un-Fuge, some ‘out of joint’ dislocation in being and in time itself, a disjointure that, in always risking the evil, expropriation, and injustice (adikia) against which there is no calculable insurance, would alone be able to do justice or to render justice to the other as other? A doing that would not amount only to action and a rendering that would not come down just to restitution? To put it too quickly and to formalize in the extreme the stakes:
good conscience of having done one's duty” and thus “loses the chance of the future.”  

What the future indicates here is, on the one hand, the unavailability of that which we experience as a kind of event, i.e. something that resists all our categories and forms of presentification. On the other hand, it signals an orientation towards a kind of non-sovereign action, the need to respond to that which comes to us as the alterity of a future.

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28 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 33(56): “This is where deconstruction would always begin to take shape as the thinking of the gift and of undeconstructible justice, the undeconstructible condition of any deconstruction, to be sure, but a condition that is itself in deconstruction and remains, and must remain (that is the injunction) in the disjuncture of the Un-Fug. Otherwise it rests on the good conscience of having done one's duty, it loses the chance of the future.” ("La disjuncture nécessaire, la condition dé-totalisante de la justice, c'est bien ici celle du présent – et du coup la condition même du présent et de la présence du présent. Ici s'annoncerait toujours la déconstruction comme pensée du don et de l'indeconstructible justice, la condition indéconstructible de toute déconstruction, certes, mais une condition qui est elle-même en déconstruction et reste, et doit rester, c'est l'injonction, dans la disjuncture de l'Un-Fug. Faute de quoi elle se repose dans la bonne conscience du devoir accompli, elle perd la chance de l'avenir.")
as an impossible (i.e. incalculable) possibility or as the undecidable that requires decision.

Given this link to an incalculable future, it is perhaps not surprising that Derrida also emphasizes that, “the here-now does not fold back into immediacy, or into the reappropriable identity of the present, even less that of self-presence.” And consequently, the demand (exigence) that the here-now carries can never be captured as an explicit and clear injunction. It “cannot be always present, it can be [or may be: peut être, T.B.], only, if there is any, it can be only possible, it must even remain a can-be or maybe [peut-être] in order to remain a demand. Otherwise it would become presence again, that is, substance, existence, essence, permanence, and not at all the excessive demand or urgency that Blanchot speaks of so correctly [justement].” 29 This also means – confirming what we said above about responsibility as a moment of non-knowledge 30 – that we can never know with certainty if we are just. This is because the very “relation to

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29 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 39(62); translation modified: “But the here-now does not fold back into immediacy, or into the reappropriable identity of the present, even less that of self-presence. Although ‘appeal,’ ‘violence,’ ‘rupture,’ ‘imminence,’ and ‘urgency’ are Blanchot’s words in the following paragraph, the demand that he says is ‘always present’ must implicitly, it seems to us, find itself affected by the same rupture or the same dislocation, the same ‘short circuit.’ It cannot be always present, it can be [peut être], only, if there is any, it can be only possible, it must even remain a can-be or maybe [peut-être] in order to remain a demand. Otherwise it would become presence again, that is, substance, existence, essence, permanence, and not at all the excessive demand or urgency that Blanchot speaks of so correctly [justement].” (“Mais l’ici-maintenant, cela ne se replie ni dans l’immédiateté, ni dans l’identité réappropriable du présent, encore moins celle de la présence à soi. Si ‘appel,’ ‘violence,’ ‘rupture,’ ‘imminence’ et ‘urgence’ sont, dans le paragraphe suivant, les mots de Blanchot, l’exigence qu’il dit ‘toujours présente’ doit implicitement, nous semble-t-il, se trouver affectée par la même rupture ou la même dislocation, le même ‘court-circuit.’ Elle ne peut être toujours présente, elle peut être, seulement, s’il y en a, elle ne peut être que possible, elle doit même rester dans le peut-être pour rester exigence. Faute de quoi elle redeviendrait présence, c’est-à-dire substance, existence, essence, permanence, nullement l’exigence ou l’urgence excessive dont Blanchot parle si justement.”).

the other” that is the only chance for justice also exposes us to the possibility of injustice and, in its excess over any laws or rules, leaves us without a clear metric to know with certainty whether our relation to another is just or unjust.  

There is “no calculable insurance” against “risking…evil, expropriation, and injustice.”

Thus, what the operation of différance indicates is that there is a way in which we always relate to the world performatively, i.e. through an originary, violent performativity. This is insofar as we never relate to it as something that simply is (i.e. is as “substance, existence, essence, permanence” given in the form of the “reappropriable identity of the present.”). Rather, we relate to it as something that carries a certain “dislocation in being and in time itself,” a dislocation that brings with it the demand or the urgency of involvement that comes to us in the form of an irreducible futurity – a futurity we cannot but engage with, but which resists any engagement in terms of a clear (and thus – because it would allow me to disengage – irresponsible) meaning or action. It is this dislocation that we will have to understand better, in order to understand both the nature of the performativity Derrida describes here as well as the responsibility that

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31 This is, on the one hand, because we can never know with certainty whether the way we relate to (i.e. conceptualize and act towards) another violently reduces this other to our categories or whether, on the contrary, we unjustly separate ourselves from this other by overemphasizing another's alterity. When Derrida, in *The Animal*, talks about his “avowed desire to escape the alternative of a projection that appropriates and an interruption that excludes” (18(37). See below FN 77), this can be interpreted as a desire for justice. On the other hand, there is also always injustice because there are always other others, or because the attention I give to one other is attention that I cannot give to another other. (see Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 69(99). See above chapter 2, FN 56)


breaks with every form of good conscience (*bonne conscience*, as we already indicated above, understood both as self-presence and as good moral conscience).

**The Aporetic Double Movement of Différance**

What is crucial to retain here as regards the structure of this dislocation and of this performativity is that it describes an aporetic double movement. This movement indicates, on the one hand, a relation to the world qua alterity that cannot be circumvented or postponed and, on the other hand, the fact that we are not related to the world as simply something present, but as something absent. In the urgency of this absence the general alterity that lies at the heart of what we call ‘the world’ emerges as something irreducibly future, something always to come. As the movement of différance, this double movement, as we will see in further detail below, fundamentally characterizes us as beings ‘in the world,’ i.e. as relatively distinct beings in space and time which relate to something other than ourselves.

And given a minimalist understanding of the world as general exteriority, this double movement is not merely something that operates at certain moments or with regard to certain aspects of the world. Rather, it is what first gives us the world in general, what defines it qua externality, but what – as this externality – gives us the world only as also a certain absence (something we will return to below in chapter 4 when trying to understand how Derrida allows us to understand our relationship to even inanimate nature differently). It is a double movement that Derrida in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign* describes as “a structural configuration, both historical

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34 See above FN 10.
and genetic…in which everything that can happen to the *autos* is indissociable from what happens *in the world* through the prosthetization of an ipseity which at once divides that ipseity, dislocates it, and inscribes it outside itself *in the world*, the world being precisely what cannot be reduced here, any more than one can reduce *tekhnē* or reduce it to a pure *physis*.”\(^{35}\) What we see here is again a double movement of relation and removal as it emerges from (or indeed *as*) the relation between self and world. And self should here be understood not as a conscious or personal self. Rather, it refers to anything that has a relation to itself qua movement towards self-identity. Thus, it includes at the very least all living beings, but also possibly inanimate entities.\(^{36}\) While the latter might not have what we call a world (not even in the mode of not-having a world that Derrida – *pace* Heidegger – ascribes to humans and animals\(^{37}\)), they still relate to an exteriority in an excess over their own identity.

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\(^{35}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 88(138): “I am thinking, rather, of a structural configuration, both historical and genetic, in which all these possibilities are not separated, and in which everything that can happen to the *autos* is indissociable from what happens *in the world* through the prosthetization of an ipseity which at once divides that ipseity, dislocates it, and inscribes it outside itself *in the world*, the world being precisely what cannot be reduced here, any more than one can reduce *tekhnē* or reduce it to a pure *physis*.” (“…[J]e pense plutôt à une configuration structurelle, a la fois historique et genetique ou toutes ces possibilities ne se separent pas, et ou tout ce qui peut arriver à l’*autos* est indissociable de ce qui se passe *dans le monde* à travers la prothetisation d’une ipseite qui à la fois clive l’ipseite, la disloque et l’inscrit hors de’elle *dans le monde*, le monde étant justement ce qu’on ne peut pas reduire ici, pas plus qu’on ne peut reduire le tekhnē ni la reduce à une *phasis* pure.”).

\(^{36}\) Such a movement could also be discerned in non-human and even inanimate entities insofar as, say, a stone offers a certain resistance to being broken up. See below chapter 6, FN 9. For the wide extension of the structure Derrida describes here see for example “Eating Well,” 269(283f.). See below FN 62.

\(^{37}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 104(159): “Are we not then justified in saying this, namely that we are also *without* this world, or poor in world, like the stone or the animal, or else as Celan says, ‘*Die Welt ist fort.*’” (“Ne sommes-nous pas alors justifiés de dire ceci, à savoir que nous sommes aussi sans ce monde, ou pauvres en monde, comme la pierre ou l'animal, ou encore, comme le dit Celan, ‘*Die Welt ist fort.*’”).
Now, the double movement of relation and removal can itself be seen from two angles. On the one hand, the self only relates to itself as removed from itself. This is how we can understand the possibility of the world as something other. The movement back to the self ends up being a movement towards the world that splits and defers self-identity. However, on the other hand, because the world first emerges as a non-return to self, or because it emerges from the self's inscription in something foreign to it, the world is only given or possible as also removed and impossible or as resisting the general categories through which we make sense of it *qua* externality.

In line with this double movement, the irreducibility of the world must here be understood in two ways: First, the world is irreducible in that any self, any *autos* necessarily relates to it. There can be no self-relation that is perfect, and not divided against itself in a way that first opens a relation to a world understood as general externality. Second, and specifically for a human (and possibly other living forms of) self, that which we relate to in this case is irreducible insofar as it is irreducible to the self and to the structures of identification and categories of meaning through which this self aims to constitute itself as self-identical (for an inanimate entity this externality is irreducible to the material structures that constitute it, such as for example certain chemical bonds). This is what makes it other, and this is how we can understand what we mean when we talk about ‘my world’ in contradistinction to ‘the world.’ The world is that which is external to us in the way it can always bring something new, something that we did and could not anticipate within our categories of meaning. The world holds the promise of the future. The promise that things will happen coming from another. ‘My
world’ designates this exteriority insofar as I (within an intersubjective context) have made sense of it, or insofar as I think I can anticipate and understand it – which also means that it designates my relation to others in this world insofar as I think I can understand and contain their worlds (or their relationship to ‘the world’ as irreducible exteriority) within mine, while ‘the world’ indicates these others as beyond what I can appropriate.\(^{38}\)

‘The world’ is thus both inevitable and never fully given or never fully reducible to any category of being for Derrida. Unlike in Husserl’s annihilation of the world, where we are left with nothing but consciousness (at least according to one school of interpretation), Derrida, as Sean Gaston puts it, marks “the ‘world’ as the residuum, the remainder that resists, the remainder that accounts for the chance of a disruption of the phenomenological relation between consciousness and world.”\(^{39}\) And the chance of this disruption derives from the fact that, although we relate to the world necessarily, we relate to it as something other. It is thus that one cannot “reduce tekhnē or reduce it to a pure physis.” That is to say that we cannot, in our conception of and relation to the world, erase the operation of tekhnē in favor of the notion of pure, i.e. self-identical, form of physis. This is because there is no pure physis. We are always already “in that differance (with an a) of originary physis, which takes the forms of law, thesis, technique, right, etc.”\(^{40}\)

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., II, 8f.(31). See below chapter 6, FN 38.

\(^{39}\) Gaston, *Concept of World*, 103. Gaston says this in the context of Derrida's discussion of hearing oneself speak and of the annihilation of the world.

\(^{40}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 126(188): “We are already either in the opposition of nomos, tekhnē,
Tekhnē would here, on the one hand, refer to the logic of the originary supplement. This logic indicates that that which is thought to be secondary and accidental (and this could be either the self-division of ipseity, the need for the loss of (self-)presence, or the world in its irreducible alterity that correlates to this self-division) vis-à-vis some originary presence (such as either the world or the self understood as self-present and completely given), in fact marks a non-originary and dynamic (i.e. non-self-identical, insubstantial, inaccessible and self-erasing) space of a movement constitutive of any presumable form of self-identity.41

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41 See for example Of Grammatology, where Derrida discusses the logic of the supplement in the context of Rousseau’s theory of writing: “For the concept of the supplement – which here determines that of the representative image – harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary. The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, techné, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function. This kind of supplementarity determines in a certain way all the conceptual oppositions within which Rousseau inscribes the notion of Nature to the extent that it should be self-sufficient. But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [suppléant] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [tient-lieu]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up of itself, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself. This second signification of the supplement cannot be separated from the first…[W]hether it adds or substitutes itself, the supplement is exterior, outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, alien to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it.” (144f,208) “Car le concept de supplement – qui détermine ici celui d'image representative – abrite en lui deux significations dont la cohabitation est aussi étrange que nécessaire. Le supplément s'ajoute, il est un surplus, une plénitude enrichissant une autre plénitude, le comble de la présence. Il cumule et accumule la présence. C'est ainsi que l'art, la techné, l'image, la représentation, la convention, etc., viennent en supplément de la nature et sont riches de toute cette fonction de cumul. Cette espèce de la supplémentarité détermine d'une certaine manière toutes les oppositions conceptuelles dans lesquelles Rousseau inscrit la notion de nature en tant qu'elle devrait se suffire à elle-même. Mais le supplément supplée. Il ne s'ajoute
On the other hand, and relatedly, *tekhnē* refers here to a logic of originary repetition where everything presumably singular and original (for example a presumably singular experience of the world) must immediately be understood as also iterable or as divided in its own presence. This is because it is only intelligible insofar as it is integrated into a structure of possible repetition that in its imperfection yields a relation to the singular other (for example the attempted repetition that constitutes the *autos*, but also relates it to something external to it). It is precisely in this self-constitution through a

que pour remplacer. Il intervient ou s'insinue à-la-place-de; s'il comble, c'est comme on comble un vide. S'il représente et fait image, c'est par le défaut antérieur d'une présence. Suppléant et vicaire, le supplément est un adjoint, une instance subalterne qui *tient-lieu*. En tant que substitut, il ne s'ajoute pas simplement à la positivité d'une présence, il ne produit aucun relief, sa place est assignée dans la structure par la marque d'un vide. Quelque part, quelque chose ne peut se remplir de soi-même, ne peut s'accomplir qu'en se laissant combler par signe et procuration. Le signe est toujours le supplément de la chose même. Cette deuxième signification du supplément ne se laisse pas distraire de la première…. [Q]u'il s'ajoute ou qu'il se substitue, le supplément est *extérieur*, hors de la positivité à laquelle il se surajoute, étranger à ce qui, pour être par lui remplacé, doit être autre que lui.

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42 For the link between *tekhnē* and iterability as well as certain turn (such as a re-turn) see for example *Beast and Sovereign*: “In this logic of iterability are found the resources both to cast into doubt oppositions of the type *physis/tekhnē* (and therefore also *physis/nomos, physis/thesis*) and to begin to analyze, in a different domain, all the fantasmatics, all the ideologies or metaphysics that today encumber so many discourses on cloning, discourses both for and against cloning.” (II, 75(120): “Ce que j'appelle l'itérabilité, qui à la fois répète le même en le déplaçant ou en l'altérant, c'est à la fois une ressource, un pouvoir décisif et une catastrophe de la répétition ou de la reproduction. Il y a dans cette logique de l'itérabilité de quoi à la fois remettre en cause les oppositions du type *physis/tekhnē* (donc aussi *physis/nomos, physis/thesis*) et commencer à analyser, pour changer de terrain, toutes les fantasmatiques, toutes les idéologies ou les métaphysiques qui encombrent aujourd'hui tant de discours sur le clonage, de discours *pro et contra* le clonage.”). See also Ibid., 130(193): “And the machination of this machine [i.e. of the book as the repetition of a trace that changes in every context and that thus possesses a certain live of the dead (see below chapter 5), T.B.], the origin of all *tekhnē*, and in it of any turn, each turn, each re-turn, each wheel, is that each time we trace a trace, each time a trace, however singular, is left behind, and even before we trace it actively or deliberately, a gestural, verbal, written, or other trace, well, this machinality virtually entrusts the trace to the sur-vival in which the opposition of the living and the dead loses and must lose all pertinence, all its edge.” (“Et la machination de cette machine, origine de toute *tekhnē*, comme en elle, de tout *tour*, de chaque tour, de chaque re-tour, de chaque roue, c'est que chaque fois que nous traçons une trace, chaque fois qu'une trace, si singulière soit-elle, est laissée, et avant même que nous ne la traions activement ou délérément, une trace gestuelle, verbale, écrite ou autre, eh bien, certe machinalité confie virtuellement la trace à la sur-vie dans laquelle l'opposition du vif et du mort perd et doit perdre toute pertinence, tout trenchant.”). Derrida describes a similar structure of *tekhnē* as the necessary repetition of the singular in “Psyche”: “And this logico-discursive mechanism [i.e. the mechanism according to which one never invents a thing, but only a new, conceptually mediated, understanding of a relation between things, T.B.] can be named *tekhnē* in the broad sense. Why? For there to be invention, the condition of a
movement towards repetition that the *autos* itself is divided in its presumed identity or relation to self. A self can only acquire an identity by relying on repetitive structures. However, these structures, insofar as they allow an existence over time, precisely also open a self towards the singular insofar as every repetition always occurs in a slightly different context at each moment, which in turn changes each repetition in a way that cannot itself be grasped through repetitive structures. This is what characterizes the emergence of the singular, and it is why any self-identity (including any presumed self-identity of the singular) is always divided.

This self-division gives us the world as something singularly other (singular because it is given as the excess over the repetition that characterizes the self in its self-relation). However, this world is precisely only given (or present) as absent, because we can only make sense of it in terms of repetitive categories that can never do justice to the world as related to us as singularly other.

certain generality must be met, and the production of a certain objective ideality (or ideal objectivity) must occasion recurrent operations, hence a utilisable apparatus. Whereas the *act* of invention can take place only once, the invented artifact must be essentially repeatable, transmissible, and transposable. Therefore, the ‘one time’ or the ‘a first time’ of the act of invention finds itself divided or multiplied in itself, in order to have given rise and put in place an iteraibility. The two extreme types of invented things, the mechanical apparatus on the one hand, the fictional or poematic narrative on the other, imply both a first time and every time, the inaugural event and iteraibility. Once invented, if we can say that, invention is invented only if repetition, generality, common availability, and thus publicity are introduced or promised in the structure of the first time. (34(46f): “Et ce dispositif logico-discursif peut être nommé *tekhnè* au sens large. Pourquoi? Il n'y a d'invention qu'à la condition d'une certaine généralité, et si la production d'une certaine idéalité objective (ou objectivité idéale) donne lieu à des opérations récurrentes, donc à un dispositif utilisable. Si l'acte d'invention peut n'avoir lieu qu'une fois, l'artefact inventé, lui, doit être essentiellement répétable, transmissible et transposable. Dès lors le ‘une fois’ ou le ‘une première fois’ de l'acte d'invention se trouve divisé ou multiplié en lui-même, d'avoir donné lieu à une itérabilité. Les deux types extrêmes des choses inventées, le dispositif machinique d'une part, la narration fictive ou poématique d'autre part, impliquent à la fois la première fois et toutes les fois, l’événement inaugural et l’itérabilité. Une fois inventée, si l'on peut dire, l'invention n'est inventée que si, dans la structure de la première fois, s'annoncent la répétition, la généralité, la disponibilité commune et donc la publicité.”).
The world then (as well as everything in or of it) emerges as and through the imperfection of the self-reference and repetition of any *autos*. Because any auto-affectivity is always auto-hetero-affectivity\(^{43}\) and because no complete repetition is possible, any *autos* necessarily relates to the world qua alterity. However, although the world emerges through the failed self-repetition of an *autos*, the world is not ontologically dependent on the *autos*. This is insofar as any *autos*, despite the ultimate failure of any complete repetition, is nevertheless characterized by this attempted repetition. It is precisely this repetition that the world escapes in its alterity. Thus, it cannot be thought as internal to such an *autos*, but has to be thought as other to it. At the same time, it is through general, i.e. repeatable categories that we can make sense of this alterity that is the world. The world in its alterity is also always *my* world, i.e. experienced as the space of possible experience.

The alterity of the world is thus undecidably placed between the self and the non-self, while the self is undecidably part of and outside the intelligible world. One is only intelligible as the other deferred: The world as the self differing and deferred and the self as the world differing and deferred. Importantly, what we see here as the differing-deferral between *autos* and world can be understood on the basis of a more general differing-deferral between same and other. Just like the self (precisely in its relation to self) is divided between sameness and alterity (between the attempted repetition that

\(^{43}\) This becomes apparent precisely in the above-quoted passage about the world as that which is irreducible (Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 88(138). See above FN 35) where it is a question of understanding the wheel as a figure of “auto-affection” (Ibid., II, 88(137)), and where it turns out that, in the need to relate to the world as other, every “auto-affective…relation” (“rapport auto-affectif”) is in fact “auto-hetero-affective” (Ibid. 83(131)).
makes it what it is and the singularity that first opens experience and allows it to be in the world, but that also makes it other to itself), the world and anything in it is divided between such sameness and alterity. This is because we can only relate to anything in a way that is both meaningful (i.e. intelligible through certain general, i.e. repeatable categories and patterns) and non-solipsistic (i.e. of something other) if we experience something as both lending itself to a meaningful experience based on certain repeatable categories and exceeding these categories in its singular alterity. This, in turn, corresponds to the fact that everything exists not just in a conceptual and socio-historical, but also in a spatio-temporal context that it cannot but be affected by, thus exceeding its own identity – something we will return to in the next chapter. It is the excess of something over our general categories of meaning that first marks something as other, as exterior and that allows us to relate to it (even if it is a relation to self[^44]). And it is this double structure that marks every experience as aporetic.

It is this more general differing-deferring between sameness and alterity that underlies our inability to think ipseity and world as two self-sufficient and self-identical entities. It is also what describes the operation of différance. Différance refers to the deferral of and the differing from sameness that constitutes everything that tends towards sameness against the backdrop of an outside context on which it nevertheless also depends. The world-giving self-division of a self-relating self (a division and self-relation

[^44]: Thus, Derrida often talks about the other within me, which marks ourselves insofar as we escape our general categories of meaning, for example the categories that guide our decision-making, but that I must exceed at the moment of decision. (see for example Politics of Friendship, 68(87). See above chapter 2, FN 98).
which marks it as experiencing) and the removal of the world through which this world becomes available (as unavailable) to experience are only two instances of this differing-deferring – although the ways we exceed our own sameness and the way the world is given in its alterity are particularly important to us insofar as they describe the way we, as experiencing beings, first relate to the world in its alterity as well as to ourselves.

The crucial question for Derrida is not simply the question of experience, but how anything that we think of as the same (for example a self) can relate to something other (for example the world). For Derrida we can only understand the possibility of such a relation if we understand it as necessary. In other words, we can only understand a relationship between same and other if we already assume that the same is never quite self-identical and thus open to something external or other. This other is turn would never be absolute. It is this structure that is also at work in the relation of any self to what we call the world and indeed of any living being to what we could call its environment.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{45} Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 158(185f.). See above chapter 2, FN 69. The relation between self and other can only be thought if we already think the other as not absolutely other and the same as not closed upon itself.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{46} Derrida, Specters of Marx, 177(224), where Derrida explain this interplay between sameness and alterity in terms of auto-immunity, which also comes back to “prosthesis and delegation, repetition, differance” (“la prothèse et la délégation, la répétition, la différance”): “The living ego is auto-immune, which is what they do not want to know. To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself it is necessarily led to welcome the other within (so many figures of death: differance of the technical apparatus, iterability, non-uniqueness, prosthesis, synthetic image, simulacrum, all of which begins with language, before language), it must therefore take the immune defenses apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once for itself and against itself.” (“Le moi vivant est auto-immune, ils ne veulent pas le savoir. Pour protéger sa vie, pour se constituer en unique moi vivant, pour se rapporter, comme le même, à lui-même, il est nécessairement amené à accueillir l'autre au-dedans (la différance du dispositif technique, l'itérabilité, la nonunicité, la prothèse, l'image de synthèse, le simulacre, et ça commence avec le langage, avant lui, autant de figures de la mort), il doit donc diriger à la fois pour lui-même et contre lui-même les défenses immunitaires apparentemment destinées au non-moi, à l'ennemi, à l'opposé, à l'adversaire.”).}\]
According to Derrida, the differing-deferring relationship that we saw exemplified between self and world is to be found with regard to anything we think of as the same insofar as it necessarily relates to an exterior context (a context that cannot be limited to or described through either the ideal or the material\(^47\)) that both constitutes and changes it in its sameness. Thus, Derrida writes in the “Différance” essay:

The same, precisely, is *différance* (with an *a*) as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other. Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (the intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred; the concept as different and deferred, differing-deferring intuition; culture as nature different and deferred, differing-deferring; all the others of *physis*, *tekhē*, *nomos*, *thesis*, society, freedom, history, mind, etc. – as *physis* different and deferred, or as *physis* differing and deferring. *Physis* as [or ‘in:’ *en*, T.B.] *différance*.\(^48\)

And in this *différance*, the same would have to be thought through a necessary relation to something entirely other (*tout autre*). For Derrida, *différance* precisely designates this “unthinkable” structure of simultaneity of “the same and the entirely other.”\(^49\) As we will see, it is this simultaneity (which, as we saw above, yields an ana-

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\(^{48}\) Derrida, “Différance,” 17(18); translation modified: “Le même est précisément la *différance* (avec un *a*) comme passage détourné et équivoque d'un différent à l'autre, d'un terme de l'opposition à l'autre. On pourrait ainsi reprendre tous les couples d'opposition sur lesquels est construite la philosophie et dont vit notre discours pour y voir non pas s'effacer l'opposition mais s'annoncer une nécessité telle que l'un des termes y apparaîsse comme la *différance* de l'autre, comme l'autre différencé dans l'économie du même (l'intelligible comme différenciant du sensible, comme sensible différencé; le concept comme intuition différencée – différenciant; la culture comme nature différencée – différenciante; tous les autres de la *physis* – *tekhē*, *nomos*, *thesis* société, liberté, histoire, esprit, etc. – comme *physis* différencée ou comme *physis* différencante. *Physis* en *différance*.”

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 19(20); “It is evident – and this is the evident itself – that the economical and the noneconomical, the same and the entirely other, etc., cannot be thought together. *If différance* is unthinkable in this way,
chrony, a “dislocation in being and in time”) that underlies the double movement of urgent relation and removal from presence we indicated above.

This removal from presence indicates the impossibility of any theoretically conclusive (and thus non-performative) determination of this urgent relation to what is other, thus creating an experience of what we termed above ‘the undecidable.’ The operation of différance lies thus at the heart of Derrida’s notion of originary performativity as the ontological supplement to the Derridean conception of ethics we developed here. It is what helps us to understand why we necessarily relate to the world and to reality not as something given or discovered, but always through a certain performativity and “in an interpretive experience”50 of the undecidable, something that is central to Derrida’s notion of responsibility.

In fact, it is right before he indicates différance as the unthinkable simultaneity of same and other that Derrida already describes différance in terms of the double movement of necessary, urgent relating and removal from presence, i.e. of the movement that we need in order to understand the emergence of the undecidable.

perhaps we should not hasten to make it evident, in the philosophical element of evidentiality which would make short work of dissipating the mirage and illogicalness of difference and would do so with the infallibility of calculations that we are well acquainted with, having precisely recognized their place, necessity, and function in the structure of difference.” (“Il est evident – c'est l'évidence même – qu'on ne peut penser ensemble l'économique et le non-économique, le même et le tout-autre, etc. Si la différance est cet impensable, peut-être ne faut-il pas se hâter de la porter à l'évidence, dans l'élément philosophique de l'évidence qui aurait tôt fait d'en dissiper le mirage et l'illogique, avec l'infaillibilité d'un calcul que nous connaissons bien, pour avoir précisément reconnu sa place, sa nécessité, sa fonction dans la structure de la différance.”).

50 Derrida, “Afterword,” 148(273): “[E]very referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and…one cannot refer to this ‘real’ except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring.” (“[T]out référent, toute réalité a la structure d'une trace différentielle, et…on ne peut se rapporter à ce réel que dans une expérience interprétative. Celle-ci ne donne ou ne prend sens que dans un mouvement de renvoi différentiel.”).
He sums up this double movement in the seemingly paradoxical characterization of “différance as the relation (rapport) to an impossible presence.” It is because différance is constitutive of us (on any level we can possibly discern: spatio-temporal, organic, living, conscious, subjective etc.) in our relation to and being in a world that this relation to an impossible presence is a necessary one. And it is because it is not a relationship to something present that it a responsible engagement. In order to understand how this is the case, it is important to look at this quote in context. The complete question Derrida asks is the following: “How are we to think simultaneously, on the one hand, différance as the economic detour which, in the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation, and, on the other hand, différance as the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, and as relation to the entirely other, apparently interrupting every economy?”

The three elements of this description of différance that are crucial here are, first, the tendency to return (“coming back,” the aspect of sameness), second, the loss of presence in death (“interrupting every economy,” the aspect of alterity) and, third, the inseparable link between these two aspects (we need to think both aspects “simultaneously”). Put shortly, the link between the first and the second aspects consists

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51 Derrida, “Différance,” 19(20); translation modified: “Comment penser à la fois la différance comme détour économique qui, dans l’élément du même, vise toujours à retrouver le plaisir où la présence différée par calcul (conscient ou inconscient) et d’autre part la différance comme rapport à la présence impossible, comme dépense sans réserve, comme perte irréparable de la présence, usure irréversible de l’énergie, voire comme pulsion de mort et rapport au tout-autre interrompant en apparence toute économie?”
in the fact that while a movement aiming for return, re-appropriation, or self-identity is indispensable for any form of existence qua self-same as well as for any constitution of meaning, such a movement can never fully succeed (and thus the “here-now” we referred to above in *Specters of Marx* should not be thought as “reappropriable identity”\(^2\)). It is thus that it necessarily encounters an irredeemable alterity that we could characterize as death, as a radical non-return to self.\(^3\) At the same time, it is only in the attempted return to self or the same, or the attempted repetition of the structures that constitute that which exists in the world, respectively, that such alterity can be experienced and understood at all – if only aporetically. Thus, both self-return and non-return, sameness and alterity need to be thought simultaneously in order to understand any form of ipseity as well as its necessary relation to a world qua other or externality.


\(^3\) It is because an attempted (although always imperfect) movement of repetition, re-appropriation and self-reference characterizes our existence insofar it possesses a certain self-identity, that Derrida uses the term ‘death’ to describe alterity. This is insofar as the latter can be understood as marking a radical non-return. Such non-return, in turn, would be what characterizes death in the common sense (i.e. understood as the end of life): It marks the ultimate unravelling of our identity as subjects, persons and living beings. Death is the moment where the repetition over time that characterizes us at every level comes to a final stop. Examples of this would be the reproduction of cells and of bodily structures, the repetitive maintenance of habits, cognitive and emotional structures as well as other traits that mark our identity (personal or otherwise). It is because such repetitions are in fact never perfect that Derrida discerns a certain death at each moment: If death is usually understood as the final and complete unravelling of repetition, Derrida uses death to refer to the partial, but nevertheless equally irretrievable and final unravelling, at work at any moment. It is at the moment of death, of final death that all re-appropriation is cut off. Thus, Derrida writes in “Psyche:” “[At] the instant of death, the limit of narcissistic reappropriation becomes terribly sharp [or cutting, trenchant: *coupante*, T.B.], it increases and neutralizes suffering” (9(21): “[À] l’instant de la mort, la limite de la réappropriation narcissique devient terriblement coupante, elle accroît et neutralise la souffrance.”). And it is through this inextricable connection between life and death, same and other that we can think, for example, the epi-genetic activation or de-activation of genes, the development of cancer (as failed re-production), or the operation of our metabolism. It is why we can adapt and change our habits and indeed why we can experience anything at all, why we have a future and a life that has time.
Now, as we already indicated above, this movement of an attempted, but always failing, return (to the self-same), of re-appropriation and of repetition of the same is not simply an abstract pattern for Derrida, nor is it limited to a human, a personal or a living self. Rather, it is the way he thinks the structure of any alleged self-sameness or identity and indeed any form of presence. This could be (and all these aspects are of course related) the identity of concepts or other ideal structures, the identity of anything material in the world, or the identity of ourselves – no matter how we conceive of ourselves, whether as subjects, living beings, organisms, persons, minds, bodies, social, embodied or material entities.

Like tekhnè, the operation of différance is irreducible. It is what constitutes all the “chances” and “threats” which affect and constitute any form of ipseity and any form

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54 See his argument concerning the necessary engagement with a specific temporal location of presumably omni-temporal structures of geometry in his introduction to his translation of Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*. Derrida writes for example: “The Idea, like Reason, is nothing outside the history in which it displays itself, i.e., in which (in one and the same movement) it discloses and lets itself be threatened.” (141(156): “L’Idée, comme la Raison, n’est rien hors de l’histoire où elle s’expose, c’est-à-dire où, dans un seul et même mouvement, elle se dévoile et se laisse menacer.”). See also “Afterword,” where Derrida says that a concept can be thought beyond its presumed self-identity or the logic of “all or nothing” (116f.(211f.). See above chapter 2, FN 93).

55 See for example “Différance,” where Derrida says that différance, in its non-being, affects everything: “Already we have had to delineate that *différance is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence.” (6(6): “Déjà il a fallu marquer que la différance *n’est pas*, n’existe pas, n’est pas un étant-présent (*on*), quel qu’il soit; et nous serons amenés à marquer aussi tout *ce qu’elle n’est pas*, c’est-à-dire *tout*, et par conséquent qu’elle n’a ni existence ni essence.”). See also ibid., 13(13): “An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject.” (“Il faut qu’un intervalle le sépare de ce qui n’est pas lui pour qu’il soit lui-même, mais cet intervalle qui le constitue en présent doit aussi du même coup diviser le présent en lui-même, partageant ainsi, avec le présent, tout ce qu’on peut penser à partir de lui, c'est-à-dire tout étant, dans notre langue métaphysique, singulièrement la substance ou le sujet.”).
of sameness. These are “chances” and “threats” that come from and as the externality of the world, allowing this ipseity both to be “constructed” and “destroyed.”\footnote{Derrida continues to above-quoted passage on the irreducibility of the world (Beast and Sovereign, II, 88(138). See above FN 35) as follows: “The question, then, is indeed that of the world. The wheel [Derrida is concerned here with the wheel both as a technological invention as well as as a metaphor for self-return and automaticity, T.B.] is not only a technical machine, it is in the world, it is outside the conscious interiority of the ipse, and what I want to say is that there is no ipseity without this prostheticity in the world, with all the chances and all the threats that it constitutes for ipseity, which can in this way be constructed but also, and by the same token, indissociably, be destroyed” (“La question est donc bien celle du monde. La roue n’est pas seulement une machine technique, elle est dans le monde, elle est hors de l’intériorité consciente de l’ipse, et ce que je veux dire, c’est qu’il n’y a pas d’ipséité sans cette prothéticité dans le monde, avec toutes les chances et toutes les menaces qu’elle constitue pour l’ipséité qui peut ainsi se construire, mais aussi bien, et par là même, indissociablement, se détruire.”).} For us (i.e. living, thinking, speaking, experiencing, feeling, cognizing, social, material, conscious and embodied beings), these chances and threats can come in many forms and on many levels. It could for example consist in our life and death, health and sickness, self-presence and self-absence, the presence and the absence of the world, experience and trauma, understanding and misunderstanding, the possibility and impossibility of community etc. This is the quasi-transcendental dis-enabling logic of the pharmakon which designates that which is remedy and poison at the same time.\footnote{Derrida, “Plato's Pharmacy,” 70(78) where Derrida describes the pharmakon as “this 'medicine,' this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison” (“cette ‘médicée,’ ce philtre, à la fois remède et poison”), which “already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence.” (“s’introduit déjà dans le corps du discours avec toute son ambivalence.”). This is precisely what describes the quasi-transcendental operation of différance for example when Derrida writes: “Differance, the disappearance of any originary presence, is at once the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of truth.” (Ibid. 168(194): “L’opposition duelle (remède/poison, bien/mal, intelligible/sensible, haut/bas, esprit/matière, vie/mort, dedans/dehors, parole/écriture, etc.) organise un champ conflictuel et hiérarchisé qui ne se laisse ni réduire à réduire à l’unité, ni dériver d’une simplicité première, ni relever ou intérieuriser dialectiquement dans un troisième terme.”).} We need to eat, but
every food is also harmful (in that it wears out the very organs that also depend on this food to function), every cellular reproduction that keeps us alive can yield cancer, the possibility of life-affirming experience is also the possibility of trauma, the possibility for love is the possibility for betrayal and disappointment, the possibility for tenderness and intimacy the possibility for violence.

Différence then, on the one hand, marks the way our identity qua complete return to self is impossible, thus indicating a constant threat to our identity. This constitutes our vulnerability, mortality, finitude and destructibility. On the other hand, in this impossibility of perfect self-return, différance also marks the possibility (as well as the necessity) of this attempted movement towards identity to exist in a worldly context.

Différance is the chance or opportunity for something to exist over time and in a context (of meaning, time, space and materiality) to which it can in principle relate and by which it can be affected. It is what allows something to be in what we call the world, i.e. to be in a way that can, in principle, be experienced (directly or indirectly). This is insofar as something that would be perfectly self-identical would be entirely indifferent to or independent of (and thus not exist in) any spatio-temporal context. It would thus neither change nor relate to anything else.\(^58\) In this sense it would be outside the world. It would be absolute non-meaning and absolute death – which would amount to the same as absolute life.\(^59\) And this means that différance, in marking the impossibility of complete

\(^58\) Nothing would ever happen to it. It could not happen. See Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl*, 207.

\(^59\) Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 102(115): “A voice without difference, a voice without writing, is at once absolutely alive and absolutely dead.” (“Une voix sans différence, une voix sans écriture est à la fois absolument vive el absolument morte.”). And because this would indicate the complete impossibility of relating to another and thus the impossibility of ethics and of justice, such a closure would, as Derrida puts
self-identity, does not just establish the possibility of being experienced. It also marks the possibility of a relation to another in the form of experiencing and being affected.

Différance can thus be seen, on the one hand, in light of an attempted return or “coming back” that would also always relate us to something other than us, to an ‘outside’ world or context (for anything living this could be termed an environment). On the other hand, it can be seen in light of the radical impossibility of any full return, i.e. in light of death. It is the first aspect that would establish the urgency and necessity of our relationship to something in the world, while the second aspect (death) is what marks this relationship as something we cannot simply relate to in a neutral or objective fashion, but that must involve a practical and performative engagement with the world in its alterity.

One of the ways in which Derrida sums up this operation of différance as relating us to something other than ourselves in the very movement of self-constitution is the term ex-appropriation. In one of his interviews with Jean-Luc Nancy, Eating Well, he says: “The ‘logic’ of the trace or of differance determines this reappropriation [i.e. the re-appropriation characteristic of the subject in German idealism and that, for Derrida, still characterizes Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein in Being and Time,\textsuperscript{60} T.B.] as an ex-...
appropriation. Re-appropriation necessarily produces the opposite of what it apparently aims for.” Derrida continues: “Exappropriation is not what is proper to man. One can recognize its differential figures as soon as there is a relation to self in its most elementary form (but for this very reason there is no such thing as elementary).” And in line with this last sentence, Derrida makes it clear that non-human living things would be subject to this structure just as much as to non-living beings – although ex-appropriation would take a different form each time. We will return to this question of the non-human in the following three chapters.

What is important for now is to indeed think the simultaneity of re- and ex-appropriation or the aporetic nature of re-appropriation qua ex-appropriation. What the movement of différance indicates is that we need to think both of these aspects at the same time, something we already saw above in the context of the world: the very structure that first gives us the world and everything in it, the structure of imperfect

61 Derrida, “Eating Well,” 269(283): “La ‘logique’ de la trace ou de la différence détermine la réappropriation comme une ex-appropriation. La ré-appropriation produit nécessairement le contraire de ce qu’apparemment elle vise. L’exappropriation n’est pas le propre de l’homme. On peut en reconnaitre les figures différentielles dès qu’il y a rapport à soi dans sa forme la plus ‘élémentaire’ (mais il n’y a pas d’élémentaire pour cette raison même).”

62 Derrida, “Eating Well,” 269(283f.). To Nancy's question “When you decide not to limit a potential ‘subjectivity’ to man, why do you then limit yourself simply to the animal?,” (“Dès lors que tu ne veux pas limiter une éventuelle ‘subjectivité’ à l’homme, pourquoi te limiter à l’animal?”) Derrida responds: “Nothing should be excluded. I said ‘animal’ for the sake of convenience and to use a reference that is as classical as it is dogmatic. The difference between ‘animal’ and ‘vegetal’ also remains problematic. Of course the relation to self in ex-appropriation is radically different (and that's why it requires a thinking of difference and not of opposition) in the case of what one calls the ‘nonliving,’ the ‘vegetal,’ the ‘animal,’ ‘man,’ or ‘God.’ The question also comes back to the difference between the living and the nonliving.” (“On ne doit rien exclure. J’ai dit ‘animal’ par commodité et pour me servir d'un index aussi classique que dogmatique. La différence entre l’‘animal’ et le ‘végétal’ reste aussi problématique. Bien entendu, le rapport à soi dans l'ex-appropriation est radicalement différent (et c'est pourquoi il s'agit d'une pensée de la différence, non de l'opposition) s'il s'agit de ce qu'on appelle le 'non-vivant', le 'végétal', l'’animal’, l’’homme’ ou ‘Dieu.’ La question revient toujours à la différence entre le vivant et le non-vivant.”).
repetition that introduces alterity within ourselves, is also the structure that makes this outside available only as unavailable, i.e. as other, or as that which escapes the very meaning- and identity-generating repetitive structures that we need in order to make sense of what we experience. The movement of re-appropriation (i.e. the movement of our existence in the world, including the movement of making sense of things, of experiencing something as given, as meaningful, sensible and as part of our world) is “necessarily” ex-appropriation (i.e. a movement beyond what we can integrate into and as this existence and, specifically, a movement beyond meaning, presence and availability).

It is thus that our relationship to anything in the world, i.e. anything given as part of the world, is necessarily performative. It necessarily involves an unjustifiable and violent movement of re-appropriation and of meaning-constitution that makes the other what it is despite itself, i.e. despite its alterity. Or, in other words, insofar as something in the world can be meaningfully identified as something, as one identifiable thing rather than another, it is meaningfully identified only through the exclusion of the very structure that also first gives rise to the process of identification, namely the alterity that indicates the break with our identity-constituting structures. To the extent that this exclusion requires a certain force and insofar as that which is excluded is the thing's resistance to any clear framing through one set of identificatory structures rather than another, there is always a pragmatic or practical element in understanding a thing as something, which is to say as a specific and identifiable thing in our world – thus excluding that it is only maintained as other in a break with this world and the unity of this world.
A performative engagement with the world qua externality is *necessary* because, as experiencing beings with a relatively stable identity over time, we can only exist in this attempted return to self. But it is precisely this movement that, insofar as it fails to achieve a complete self-return, necessarily relates us to something other than ourselves, something which gives rise to what we call a world, but which also establishes this world as a continued excess over any meaning we could assign to it. On the one hand, we cannot interrupt or avoid this return to self in the form of experience and affectivity (hence, the aspect of necessity). On the other hand, we also cannot relate to it as simply a form of presence, because it only becomes available to us as an interruption of (self-)presence. Thus, whatever we experience as simply given, as present and presentable through a constative proposition can in fact only appear this way due to a performative, re-appropriating involvement on our part that creates this effect of presence or this “actuality effect.”

63 Derrida, “Force of Law,” 256(59f.): “Since every constative utterance itself relies, at least implicitly, on a performative structure (‘I tell you that I speak to you, I address myself to you to tell you that this is true, that things are like this, I promise you or renew my promise to you to make a sentence and to sign what I say when I say that I tell you, or try to tell you, the truth,’ and so forth), the dimension of *justesse* or truth of theorectico-constative utterances (in all domains, particularly in the domain of the theory of law) always thus presupposes the dimension of justice of the performative utterances, that is to say their essential precipitation, which never proceeds without a certain dissymmetry and some quality of violence. That is how I would be tempted to understand the proposition of Levinas, who, in a whole other language and following an entirely different discursive procedure, declares that *la vérité suppose la justice* [truth presupposes justice].’ Dangerously parodying the French idiom, one could end up saying: ‘La justice, il n'y a que ça de vrai.’ This is, no need to insist, not without consequence for the status, if one can still say that, of truth, of the truth of which Saint Augustine says that it must be ‘made.’” (“Tout énoncé constatif reposant lui-même sur une structure performative au moins implicite (‘je te dis que je te parle, je m'adresse à toi pour te dire que ceci est vrai, qu'il en est ainsi, je te promets ou je te renouvelle la promesse de faire une phrase et de signer ce que je dis quand je dis que je dis ou je essaie de te dire la vérité’, etc.), la dimension de justesse ou de vérité des énoncés théorico-constatifs (dans tous les domaines, en particulier dans le domaine de la théorie du droit) présuppose donc toujours la dimension de justice des énoncés performatifs, c'est-à-dire leur essentielle précipitation. Celle-ci ne va jamais sans une certaine dissymétrie et quelque qualité de violence. C'est ainsi que je serais tenté d'entendre la proposition de Lévinas qui, dans un tout autre langage et selon une procédure discursive toute différente, déclare que ‘la vérité suppose la justice’. En parodiant dangereusement l'idiome français, on finirait par dire: ‘La justice, il n'y a que ça de...
be grounded in anything that would precede it, because it is the movement that first allows anything to be (i.e. to present itself with a relatively stable identity). It thus marks the absence of any fixed and stable ground or foundation. It is here that responsibility as insubstitutability can first take hold.

This movement of différence and ex-appropriation yields an understanding of ourselves and anything in the world as not substantial, but as the happening or occurrence of a dynamic movement that is both violent (in its forceful, but groundless tendency towards identity that pursues itself against its own interruption) and violable or vulnerable (in the way this movement is always incomplete). It is in light of this violence and violability that our necessary attempts to relate to the world and to each other based on stable and certain rules, concepts and structures of repetition can only be seen as a vraï.’ Cela n'est pas sans conséquence, inutile de le souligner, quant au statut, si on peut encore dire, de la vérité, de cette vérité dont saint Augustin rappelle qu'il faut la ‘faire.’”). See also “Deconstruction of Actuality,” 86(62), where Derrida talks about what he calls “artefactuality.” He writes: “[T]hey [i.e. the two “most current features of actuality,” T.B.] do point to what constitutes actuality in general. One could go so far as to give them two portmanteau terms: *artefactuality* and *actuvirtuality*. The first feature, therefore, is that actuality *is made*: it is important to know what it is made of, but it is just as important to know that it is made. It is not given, but actively produced, sifted, contained, and performatively interpreted by many hierarchizing and selective procedures – *false or artificial* procedures that are always in the service of forces and interests of which their ‘subjects’ and agents (producers and consumers of actuality – who are sometimes ‘philosophers’ and always interpreters) are never sufficiently aware. The ‘reality’ (to which ‘actuality’ refers) – however singular, irreducible, stubborn, painful, or tragic it may be – reaches us through fictional constructions (*facture*)” (“Permettez-moi de marquer schématiquement *deux traits* parmi les plus actuels de l'actualité. Ils sont trop abstraits pour cerner ce qu'aurait de plus propre mon expérience ou quelque autre expérience *philosophique* de ladite ‘actualité’, mais ils désignent ce qui fait l'actualité en général. On pourrait se raccorder à leur donner deux surnoms-valise: *l'artefactualité* et *l'actuvirtualité*. Le premier trait, c'est que l'actualité, précisément, est *faite*: pour savoir de quoi elle est faite. il n'en faut pas moins savoir aussi qu'elle est faite. Elle n'est pas donnée mais activement produite, criblée, investie, performativement interprétée par nombre de dispositifs *factices ou artificiels*, hiérarchisants et sélectifs, toujours au service de forces et d'intérêts que les ‘sujets’ et les agents (producteurs et consommateurs d'actualité – ce sont aussi parfois des ‘philosophes’ et toujours des interprètes) ne perçoivent jamais assez. Si singulièr, irréductible, têtue, douloureuse ou tragique que reste la ‘réalité’ à laquelle se réfère l’‘actualité’, celle-ci nous arrive à travers une *facture* fictionnelle.”).
constant, but necessary failure. And insofar as both this movement towards repetition and its failure, i.e. both life and death, are necessary for our self-constitution and our relationship to the world, we are always relating to the world as something to-come, something open-ended that resists closure, and as something that demands a certain non-sovereign (i.e. open-ended, un-anticipatable and never fully controlled) doing.

The world and anything of this world is thus not given as what it is (which also means that nothing ever simply is in this world and that there is always the possibility that there is no world). Rather, our necessary (necessary because constitutive of ourselves as beings in the world, i.e. beings related in a specific way to something exterior) and non-sovereign movement to determine the world or any worldly entity as what it is, is always deferred and vulnerable insofar as it could always be performed otherwise. It thus differs from itself. Thus, because the very structure that opens us towards the world preempts an access to the world as something fully present, any presentifying determination of the world must in fact be understood as violent and performative. However, as we saw above, this does not mean that there is no urgency. While the movement towards determination (of ourselves, of others and of our relation to what is other) cannot be completed and thus can only be performative, this movement

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64 This is a failure that of course only appears as a failure in the context of a metaphysics that normatively prioritizes independent un-changing identity over relation and change.

65 See also below chapter 6.

66 See above FN 10.
cannot be deferred either because it is what constitutes us as existing in the movement of ex-appropriation.

What underlies Derrida's conception of unlimitable responsibility is thus that there is no subject and nothing in the world that can be accessed or thought as existing by and in itself. Rather, anything in the world (including ourselves) that we experience and engage with based on certain ontological, epistemic or ethical categories can only be understood as the result of a violent determining movement (i.e. a movement that persists against resistance and threats to its continuation), a movement that, in our case, makes something part of our world (i.e. the world understood not in its alterity, but as a space of possible experience). It relates something to us in our particularity and through a particular context (something we will return to in the next chapter), but in a way that always tends to appear to be universal (insofar as it appears to just give us the thing as it is). This movement means that nothing is simply given or past, and that, conversely, everything is open towards a future, towards the breaking with any bonne conscience, any subjective certainty (moral or otherwise). It means that what something is and how we relate to it is never conclusively clear or certain.

This is how we can understand a passage from “Archive Fever” on the self-deconstruction of the One to which I will turn now and which relates us back to the questions of violence, of time and of justice with which we began our discussion above by reference to Specters of Marx.
The Impossibility of the One

Derrida begins this passage by writing about the constitutive vulnerability of anything that is One (the capital ‘O’ signaling here that he has in mind something that would be existentially and conceptually self-sufficient, i.e. that can exist and thus be understood as self-identical without reference to something else): “As soon as there is the One, there is murder, wounding, traumatism. L’Un se garde de l’autre. The One guards against/keeps some of the other. It protects itself from the other, but, in the movement of this jealous violence [a movement that is jealous insofar as it tends to reduce that which is other in favor of full self-return, T.B.], it comprises in itself, thus guarding it, the self-otherness or self-difference (the difference from within oneself) which makes it One.”

What we see here is another manifestation of the double movement we saw above where there is both a return and non-return to self that constitutes any form of ipseity (including the multiple levels of ipseity we can discern in our own identity). Anything that is one, i.e. which can be said to be one thing and not another, both protects itself against alterity, tries to exclude it (which means it tends to return to itself), as well as invites and carries alterity within itself as that which constitutes it as one. This is insofar as the alterity that emerges as the imperfection of our movement towards self-return and

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67 Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 51(124f.): “Dès qu'il y a de l'Un, il y a du meurtre, de la blessure, du traumatisme. L’Un se garde de l’autre. Il se protège contre l'autre, mais, dans le mouvement de cette jalousie violence, il comporte en lui-même, la gardant ainsi, l'altérité ou la différence à soi (la différence d'avec soi) qui le fait Un. L’Un de soi-même différent’. L’Un comme l’Autre. A la fois, en même temps, mais dans un même temps disjoint, L’Un oublie de se rappeler à lui-même, il garde et efface l'archive de cette injustice qu'il est. De cette violence qu'il fait. L'Un se fait violence. Il se viole et violente mais il s'institue aussi en violence. Il devient ce qu'il est, la violence même - qu'il se fait ainsi. Auto-détermination comme violence. L’Un se garde de l'autre pour se faire violence (parce qu'il se fait violence et en vue de se faire violence). Cela ne peut se dire et donc s'archiver de façon aussi économique qu'en français. Or il est nécessaire que cela se répète. C'est la Nécessité même, Anànkê.”
re-appropriation (as a form of self-difference) still indicates that there is a movement towards self-appropriation and attempted self-protection. In other words, this unity of the One only constitutes itself through that which it excludes or that which it is not. Thus, the self, for instance, constitutes itself in its separation from the world.

However, in being constituted in this negative relation, the One is also marked as existentially and conceptually dependent on that which is excludes. It only exists in the context of what it is not. Thus, we understand alterity only through its own exclusion and erasure, just as we understand the same and the one only through that which is other and more-than-one (i.e. self-different). Derrida relies on the double meaning of the phrase “L’Un se garde de l’autre” in order to convey this sense that in the very moment when the one protects itself against the other, it also thereby invites the other to stay, keeps the other within itself. In the case of the self, as we saw above, this mean that as we tend towards a relation towards the self (for example in the form of self-consciousness) we end up with something other, such as the world, which is both what materially enables the existence of a self and allows for an understanding of a self (insofar as a self must be understood as being able to relate to something other than itself). This movement in its generality would be what makes anything One or (if we adopt the terminology of the “Différance” essay) the same. In accordance with the structure of this aporetic double movement, Derrida continues: “The ‘One differing, deferring from itself.’” The One as the Other. At once, at the same time, but in a same time which is out of joint, [again we see the simultaneity of same and other68 that marks ana-chrony and “dislocation in being and

in time itself,”⁶⁹ T.B.] the One forgets to remember itself to itself [or it forgets in recalling itself to itself: *L'Un oublie de se rappeler à lui-même*, T.B.], it keeps and erases the archive of this injustice that it is.”⁷⁰

This reference to injustice is important for our purpose of seeing the mutual supplementing of experience and ethics or of the theoretical and the practical. Specifically, what we see in this reference to injustice is how what so far in this passage seemed like a merely theoretical discussion concerning the constitution of identity also has ethico-political implications. And somewhat similar to the way Derrida, as we saw above,⁷¹ draws on the double meaning of the French *conscience*, we can read this juncture of the theoretical and the practical in the term “injustice.” This is insofar as this term etymologically refers us to the ambiguous French adjective *juste*, a word which is another focal point for the undecidability between theoretical and practical considerations. The word carries connotations of both justice in the socio-political and sometimes legal sense of *iūstitia, dikè, Gerechtigkeit* (*justice*, in French) as well as of that which is correct, well-adjusted, fitting or true (*justesse*, in French).⁷²


⁷⁰ Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 51(125), see above FN 67.


⁷² Derrida frequently relies on or refers to this double meaning. In particular, in “Force of Law” (256(59f.). See above FN 63) Derrida writes about this in terms in the constative and the performative and – like in *Specters of Marx* and in “Archive Fever” – in terms of a violent doing. And the way that the accuracy (*justesse*) of the constative would depend on the justice (*justice*) of the performative would here be reflected in the way that the consciousness (*conscience*) of anything as present would not be given without an involving engagement that opens us to the interruption of any good conscience (*bonne conscience*) as the experience of responsibility (*Specters of Marx*, 32f.(55f.). See above FN 27, 28). Indeed, Derrida himself hints at this link between the double meaning of *juste* and that of *conscience* as well as responsibility in “Force of Law,” when he writes: “[T]here is no *justesse*, no justice, no responsibility
The injustice of the one would thus, given what was said previously, consist in its own unjust maladjustment, in the way it does never fully fit either itself (because it is interrupted by otherness) or that which it refers to (because it only aporetically relates to it as alterity). The injustice in this case derives from a maladjustment that carries with it a violence that is both self- and other-oriented, a violence directed against the identity of the one (which can only exist through the interruption coming from another) and against the singular alterity of another (which one can only relate to through a partial re-appropriation of another, which is precisely why this other is only present as absent).

Thus, Derrida continues by saying that the One does not just maintain and destroy “the archive of this injustice that it is,” but also “[o]f this violence that it does. L’Un se fait violence. The One makes itself violence [or the one turns itself into violence and does (fait) violence to itself, T.B.]. It violates and does violence to itself but it also institutes itself as violence [towards something else, T.B]. It becomes what it is, the very violence – that it does to itself. Self-determination as violence. L’Un se garde de l’autre pour se faire violence (because it makes itself violence and so as to make itself violence).” 73 This phrase (“L’Un se garde de l’autre pour se faire violence.”), in the multiplicity of meanings that it contains, performs the very thing it says. It undermines its own self-identity, but that which undermines it is precisely the feature that enables any living language, namely that it adapts to and takes on different meanings in different contexts (which means that

except in exposing oneself to all risks, beyond certainty and good conscience.” (287(122):“[I]l n'y a de justesse et de justice et de responsabilité qu'à s'exposer à tous les risques, au-delà de la certitude et de la bonne conscience.”).

there is no One context that is closed on itself). It thus illustrates with regard to the presumed unity of a phrase and its context what is the case of any one thing that exists in a certain context (which is to say, for everything). The phrase – in “an economical fashion,”74 (i.e. efficiently, but also illustrating the structure of every law of the oikos, the proper, or the one) – indicates both that ‘the one protects itself from the other so as to make itself violence,’ (identity as violence towards another) as well as that ‘the one preserves something of that which is other for itself, because or insofar as it does violence to itself,’ (The relation to the other as violence towards the one or the same). It should also be noted that while we can phrase this in terms of violence, we can also understand this double violence of being both protective against and vulnerable to another as indicating a certain oscillation or interplay between injustice and justice and violence and non-violence. The injustice that separates me from myself would be the only way to relate to another. It would thus be the condition of justice.75 It would also indicate a certain “non-violence” or “weakness” within the violence that constitutes me.76 This is insofar as this violence towards myself would open me towards another in a way that breaks with the violence of the one or the same that characterizes my appropriation of another into the unity of my world – although this break can never be separated from either the violence against myself or the violence of appropriation. It is aporetically

74 Derrida says about the phrase: “Only in French can this be said and thus archived in such an economical fashion.” (“Archive Fever,” 51(125): “Cela ne peut se dire et donc s'archiver de façon aussi économique qu'en français.”).

75 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 32(55). See above FN 27.

related to them. In this sense, my relation to another would be undecidably violent (insofar as I understand another through appropriative categories) and non-violent (insofar as it allows another to affect me through an alterity that breaks with any such categories). The impossible desire for justice would this be a “desire to escape the alternative of a projection that appropriates and an interruption that excludes.”

Despite the aspect of non-violence, however, the one, in its unity, can only constitute itself in relation to others, or constitute itself as a relation to others through a constant violence of determination that undecidably lies between same and other (and that we are responsible for). Every determination of the one violently excludes that which is other. At the same time, this determination also depends on a violent interruption by another in its very movement. Every determination of another violently excludes this other in its alterity. At the same time, this determination is also the only way to make that which is other available in its alterity. Thus, what we are with regard to others and what others are with regard to us is always the result of what we might call a violent ‘taking place’ in and of the world, a taking place that can be read both neutrally as occurrence (because we are not sovereignly controlling this taking place, but depending on another, on a giving of place and of a world) and actively as a doing or taking (because we are responsible for this taking place, for this taking up of space and time, because we are this taking of a place).

77 Derrida, *The Animal*, 18(37): “…le désir ainsi avoué d'échapper à l'alternative de la projection appropriante et de l'interruption coupante,…”
As we said above, this taking place is necessary. It is necessary that anything allegedly one, anything that is something identifiable, relates to another, that it constitutes itself through a re-appropriation that is always ex-appropriation insofar as it passes through, but never quite returns from, something other – a non-return we might call the origin of a world (insofar as for us the world begins as the alterity that breaks with the sameness that characterizes our identity and our general categories of meaning). And insofar as anything that is is only in the violent differing-deferring movement towards its own identity, Derrida refers to this violent (non-)repetition as necessity itself or Anankē (i.e. the term Plato uses in the Timaeus to refer to necessity).

He thus continues: “Now it is necessary that this repeat itself. It is Necessity itself, Anankē.” And in line what Derrida says about another term in Plato's Timaeus – namely khora as the space before any space that allows for any taking place – we can characterize this violent performativity as the “necessity of that which, while giving place” “seems sometimes to be itself no longer subject to the law of the very thing which it situates.” In other words, this necessary movement of violent performativity cannot

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78 Interestingly, Plato also relates necessity to disorder and chance, saying that this is why it must be guided by intellect (Timaeus, 46E). For Derrida necessity is likewise the necessity of a certain chance or disorder, but one that no intellect can ever quite control or guide (something that Plato might not necessarily deny), but that is at work at the heart of intellect itself.


80 Derrida, “Khora,” 90(18): “Beyond the retarded or johnny-come-lately opposition of logos and mythos, how is one to think the necessity of that which, while giving place to that opposition as to so many others, seems sometimes to be itself no longer subject to the law of the very thing which it situates? What of this place? It is nameable? And wouldn’t it have some impossible relation to the possibility of naming? Is there something to think there, as I have just so hastily said, and to think according to necessity?” (“Par-delà l'opposition arrêtée ou tard venue du logos et du mythos, comment penser la nécessité de ce qui, donnant lieu à cette opposition comme à tant d'autres, semble parfois ne plus se soumettre à la loi de cela même qu'elle situe? Quoi de ce lieu? Est-il nommable? et n'aurait-il pas quelque rapport impossible à la possibilité de nommer? Y a-t-il là quelque chose à penser, comme nous le disions si vite, et à penser selon la
be understood through any structures, rules or law that constitute anything in or of this world (including the subject). It is an untraceable necessity of violent excess and alterity that first enables any form of existence, but that also marks this existence as never grounded in a substance, i.e. never grounded in something that persists unchanged over time in relation to merely accidental changes of that which it is the substance of. Rather, anything that exists would persist (while simultaneously erasing itself) as an always incomplete repetition or through an exposure in time – which is to say that there is no existence itself.

It is this excess over any law, which first institutes any law and repetition, that also opens us towards a future to come (l’àvenir à venir), a future that escapes any form of presentification, but that we cannot avoid and that engages us in the form of an originary performativity. Derrida thus continues the passage from Archive Fever as follows: “The One, as self-repetition, can only repeat and recall this instituting violence. It can only affirm itself and engage itself [i.e. relate to itself, but also engage itself to something other, T.B.] in this repetition. This is even what ties in depth the injunction of

nécessité?“). Elsewhere in this text Derrida makes it clear that khôra is not just what which gives place to oppositions, but gives place in general (i.e. the place as cosmos and history) (see ibid., and 110(60), 117(75f.), 126(95)), and that this marks khôra as designating a fundamental necessity: “The strange difficulty of this whole text lies indeed in the distinction between these two modalities: the true and the necessary. The bold stroke consists here in going back behind and below the origin, or also the birth, toward a necessity which is neither generative nor engendered and which carries philosophy, ‘precedes’ (prior to the time that passes or the eternal time before history) and ‘receives’ the effect, here the image of oppositions (intelligible and sensible): philosophy. This necessity (khôra is its sur-name) seems so virginal that it does not even have the figure of a virgin any longer.” (Ibid., 126(94f.). See also see also 90(18): “La difficulté insolite de tout ce texte tient en effet à la distinction entre ces deux modalités : le vrai et le nécessaire. L’audace consiste ici à remonter en deçà de l’origine, ou aussi bien de la naissance, vers une nécessité qui n’est ni génératrice ni engendrée et qui porte la philosophie, ‘précède’ (avant le temps qui passe ou le temps éternel avant l’histoire) et ‘reçoit’ l’effet, ici l’image des oppositions (intelligible et sensible): la philosophie. Cette nécessité (khôra en est le surnom) paraît si vierge qu’elle n’a même plus la figure d’une vierge.”).
memory with the anticipation of the future to come. The injunction, even when it summons memory or the safeguard of the archive, turns incontestably [and here the above-mentioned urgency emerges, T.B.] toward the future to come.81

The injunction of memory can be understood here as that which constitutes us as a form of inheritance, as that which is to be preserved in repetition. The link between the injunction of memory and the future derives from the fact that such repetition is always imperfect. It thus opens towards a future. This future indicates something that cannot be accommodated within the past understood through the possibility of a complete re-collection, re-presentation and re-petition. It is what links us to another that has not taken shape yet and which is still to come. Thus, we can only relate to this other performatively, being always engaged in a never-ending determination of this future alterity. And we performatively relate to this other necessarily insofar as we must return this other to the repetition that constitutes the one, which is the only way we can experience this other. And this return, again, can only be done performatively and through a certain violence insofar as it is not rooted in anything simply given. Derrida continues: “It [i.e. ‘the injunction of memory,’ T.B.] orders to promise, but it orders repetition, and first of all self-repetition, self-confirmation in a yes, yes.” This “yes, yes”

81 Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 51(125f.): “Répétition de soi, l'Un ne peut que répéter et rappeler cette violence institutrice. Il ne peut s'affirmer et s'engager que dans cette répétition. C'est même ce qui lie en profondeur l'injonction de mémoire à l'anticipation de l'à-venir. Même quand elle assigne la mémoire ou la garde de l'archive, l'injonction se tourne irrécusablement vers l'à-venir. Elle ordonne de promettre mais elle ordonne alors la répétition, et d'abord la répétition de soi, sa confirmation dans un oui, oui. À inscrire ainsi la répétition au cœur de l'à-venir, il faut bien y importer du même coup la pulsion de mort, la violence de l'oubli, la sur-répression, l'anarchive, bref la possibilité de mettre à mort cela même, quel qu'en soit le nom, qui porte la loi dans sa tradition: l'archonte de l'archive, la table, ce qui porte la table et qui porte la table, le subjectile, le support et le sujet de la loi.”
would here indicate again a repetition, but one that inscribes the same twice, each time in a different context of space and time and thus differently.\textsuperscript{82}

In this difference, as we already saw above, there is each time the possibility of death as irrecoverable non-repetition, as well as a threat coming from a desire for death as perfect repetition, as a kind of machine that completely reduces any singularity, alterity and time. Thus, Derrida writes:

If repetition is thus inscribed at the heart of the future to come [again, we see the irreducibility of tehknè, T.B.], one must also import there, \textit{in the same stroke} [because the repetition that reduces the alterity of the future runs parallel to the alterity that interrupts every repetition, T.B.], the death drive [which, as we saw above,\textsuperscript{83} is one of the two simultaneous sides of différance, T.B.], the violence of forgetting, \textit{superrepression} (suppression and repression), the anarchive, in short, the possibility of putting to death the very thing, whatever its name, which carries the law in its tradition: the archon of the archive, the table, \textit{what} carries the table and \textit{who} carries the table, the subjectile, the substrate, and the subject of the law.\textsuperscript{84}

Thus, that which carries the law of its repetition (for example in the form of subjective experience), that which does so in carrying itself on in its tradition or passing on, must not be thought as substance (as we already saw above in our discussion of \textit{Specters of Marx}\textsuperscript{85}). What Derrida does here, in effect, is to rethink the conditions of any identity, and in particular of the identity of what is traditionally often called a subject or a self. This is insofar as the latter only persists in time insofar as it also lets itself be affected by an alterity that precisely marks this existence as temporal and in-substantial.

\textsuperscript{82} In this sense, it would be similar to what we said in chapter 2 about the phrase “\textit{Tout autre est tout autre.”} See above chapter 2 FN 79.

\textsuperscript{83} Derrida, “Différence,” 19(20). See above FN 49.

\textsuperscript{84} Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 51(126). See above FN 81.

In this radical vulnerability to another, the regular or lawful structures that constitute our identity at any level cannot be understood as rooted in any substance or substrate that would be truly proper to us and thus immune to the alterity of time. It is thus that we—and indeed that anything—risks death and obliteration at any moment. We cannot think ourselves or anything we relate to as substantial. Rather, we have to think it as a movement of preservation and erasure or preservation as erasure and erasure as preservation. And it is this absence of any ultimate foundation that renders fragile any clear separation between our relationships to ourselves and to others as theoretical (or as detached observers) and such relationships as practical (as involved agents).

**Différance and the Link Between Ethics and Experience**

It is, in other words, this violent movement of différance relating anything in an aporetic and inevitable way to that which is other that inextricably links experience and ethics, consciousness and conscience, *justesse* and *justice*, being and the may-be. Alterity is what constitutes us and it is what first gives rise to our relationship to anything, to what we call the world and what we call ourselves. Hence, it is irreducible. However, it arrives not as something given. It arrives as something not yet fully formed (and indeed something resisting any conclusive formation). It is because alterity is both inevitable and not given as present that it arrives as something to come and indeed something to do. And even if this is a doing that could (and would always also) be non-conscious and non-sovereign, it would still mark an engagement on our part for which we are responsible.

Anything in the world, anything we encounter in it, carries with it an urgency of engagement in the very way it appears as something. This is because the precise way it
appears as something cannot be divorced from our particular relation to it, a relation that – in its particularity – emerges from the undecidability between the repeatable structures that constitute our existence and our world of meaning, on the one hand, and the singular moments and relations that break with these repeatable structures and that first mark our being in the world, on the other hand. Every relation to the world – even if it seems like a mere passive experience – puts us as play in our singularity and involves us in what we experience. This is despite the fact that our general categories of meaning precisely operate as a forgetting of the violent originary performativity through which we relate to the world. This is why the relationship between an experiencing subject and the world can never be understood in terms of a disengaged reflection or re-presentation. We only access the world in a constitutive maladjustment that engages us in a constant re-adjustment that constitutes both ethics and experience or that constitutes all experience as a responsible engagement.

It is this necessary and violent injustice, this maladjustment towards ourselves and towards anything in the world that opens the possibility of justice (understood as an attempted facing of singular alterity) and of responsibility. However, as we saw above, Derrida is highly skeptical of any self-assured self-attribution of justice or responsibility. Justice and responsibility would always be future, always to come. This is because we know that the singular cannot be addressed and considered as such. It is precisely what resists the general categories we would need to know and experience. However, it is in our openness towards that which is singular that we can hope for justice and responsibility. And such justice or responsibility would not be a permanent state, but an
open-ended practice. Such a practice would be based on the dual recognition that it is
dependent on repeatable categories, while, at the same time, any stable and fixed system
of responsibility always tends towards a potentially noxious reduction of the singular in
favor of general categories. Any sole reliance on such categories would mark a flight
from the real operation of différance, one that can only be maintained based on a
perpetual exclusionary violence. This would be an exclusionary violence that would aim
to reduce the violence exerted against the One (for example the human or a certain
nation) in order to keep it safe and sound, but that, in doing so would carry violence into
the one via the violence it exerts against the other (such as animals, ‘nature,’ or ‘the
environment’) as well as against the others within the presumed unity of the one (such as
those who practice or desire less violent relationship to the non-human world). We could
think here of all the ways that the exclusion of non-human others comes back to harm us
in the form of pollution, sickness, destruction of habitat or emotional hardship, and the
ways that environmental destruction is often carried out against protests by the very
humans in whose name it allegedly occurs.

On the one hand, then, Derrida does inherit a certain enlightenment project and
does write in order to make us understand our condition better and so that we may avoid
living in a false sense of theoretical or practical security. On the other hand, his writing
also undermines the idea of the sovereign subject to such an extent that the openness
towards singular others that he designates as both unavoidable and normatively charged
is not something that we simply control either theoretically or practically. We do not
control it theoretically insofar as we cannot conclusively determine what another is or if
and how exactly we should relate to this other. This relates to the fact that in order for any conceptualization to occur we must already be affected by another. We are open to another independently of what we understand about this other and we are affected by what is other whether we are aware of it or not. Conversely, we do not control it practically because we cannot simply will this openness into existence. We are always too late. In what we imagine to be sovereign acts (such as passing animals welfare or climate legislation or in discussion geoengineering) we are already responding to a violence against the human One (which thus shows itself to not be One) coming from multiple others that we can never quite fix or exclude either conceptually or institutionally.\textsuperscript{86} This also means that we cannot simply intentionally create openness towards that which is other, because we can never know with any degree of certainty to what extent we let that which is other be and to what extent we re-integrate it into what is repeatable. In other words, we cannot sovereignly welcome others, because we never

\textsuperscript{86} This is why deconstruction is for Derrida never just an activity or an intentional practice. It is always also something that happens as the arrival of something other or the shifting of the general structures that constitute us and our world as they are affected by the alterity of time. And this is indeed a question of what happens ‘in the world.’ Thus, in \textit{Beast and Sovereign} Derrida writes: “When I say ‘slow and differentiated deconstruction,’ what do I mean by that? First, that the rhythm of this deconstruction cannot be that of a seminar or a discourse ex cathedra. This rhythm is first of all the rhythm of what is happening in the world. This deconstruction is what is happening, as I often say, and what is happening today in the world – through crises, wars, phenomena of so-called national and international terrorism, massacres that are declared or not, the transformation of the global market and of international law – what is happening is so many events that are affecting the classical concept of sovereignty and making trouble for it.” (I, 76(113f.): “Quand je dis ‘déconstruction lente et différenciée’, qu'est-ce que j'entends par là? D'abord que cette déconstruction, son rythme, ne peut être celui d'un séminaire ou d'un discours \textit{ex cathedra}. Ce rythme est d'abord celui de ce qui arrive dans le monde. Cette déconstruction, c'est ce qui arrive, comme je dis souvent, et qui arrive aujourd'hui dans le monde à travers les crises, les guerres, les phénomènes dudit terrorisme dit national et international, les tueries déclarées ou non, la transformation du marché mondial et du droit international qui sont autant d'événements qui affectent et mettent à mal le concept classique de souveraineté. Dans ce séminaire, nous commençons seulement à réfléchir et à prendre en compte, de façon aussi conséquente que possible, \textit{ce qui arrive.’}).
quite know what others are. This is because knowledge in its repeatability would precisely be that which others in their singularity escape.

However, what Derrida does offer us is an alternative understanding of our being in the world as deeply relational or other-oriented, i.e. relational to such an extent that we cannot ascertain the relata to precede the relation or that our own identity precedes the alterity that threatens, but also constitutes it. It is from this deep relationality that responsibility emerges with regard to anything and everything, and in particular a responsibility to constantly rethink and reconsider the concepts that organize our relationships to the world.

Given the instability of any strict conceptual boundaries in their vulnerability to what is other, what we can understand based on Derrida's rethinking of responsibility is the problematic character of ethical or political categories that operate through strict exclusions – such as all the categories that constitute anthropocentrism. This is why Derrida can help us to analyze our current environmental problems insofar as they are rooted in a conceptual frame that works through strict limits and exclusions. As regards the so-called non-human world, Derrida allows us to understand how any exclusive ontology or ethics that assigns a privileged place to those designated through the category ‘human’ is not just contributing to an unsustainable way of life, as so many have pointed out especially over the last decades (and which Derrida would not deny, although it is not his point of focus). It is also conceptually unsustainable and only maintains itself through multiple levels of violent exclusion. As we already indicated at the end of the last chapter, we can think here for example of the ways that animal suffering and
environmental destruction are materially removed from us,\textsuperscript{87} of the way that we raise our children to see emotional relationship to non-human entities as secondary or indeed irrelevant, of the grand narratives that characterize any culture that includes non-humans in their community as primitive, of the way that individuals or communities less violent towards non-human others (such as animal/environmental activists, vegetarians or certain ‘hippie’ or indigenous communities) are often ridiculed, infantilized or criminalized, of the way we lack the vocabulary to talk about the loss that lies in the destruction of natural sites such as mountains or rivers or the disappearance of species beyond a loss of economic or, possibly, psychological utility.

Thus, while Derrida does not provide us with any clear-cut solutions, he can (against the backdrop of many other reasons that might lead us to reconsider our relationship to what we call non-human nature) provide our discourse with a certain flexibility or dynamism. The exclusionary relations to non-human beings that we have been cultivating through concepts, institutions and actions are not exactly wrong (or at least Derrida does not provide us the means to say something like this). However, they are fragile and they are based on multiple and repeated violent decisions for which we are responsible. What we can begin to see through a Derridean framework of unlimitable responsibility (that nevertheless must always be limited) is the vast extent of alternative possibilities in our relationship to non-human nature. Through his work we can draw attention to the fact that neither reason, nor divine providence, nor economic necessity,

\textsuperscript{87} We export environmental destruction, for example by exporting trash or producing consumer goods in countries with lower environmental standards. There is also the way that slaughterhouses are now removed from cities or laws that prohibit filming in slaughterhouses. See above chapter 2, FN 198-200.
nor any axioms of ethics, politics, philosophy or economics can justify the destruction we visit upon the non-human world as well as upon ourselves (and especially the weakest among us). It is something we need to take responsibility for. To be sure, we might always decide that we are willing to bear this responsibility. However, Derrida shows that such a decision to bear these responsibilities can never be permanent (insofar as it cannot be based on anything permanent) and that we cannot excuse our participation in our current way of life based on any last principle.

Furthermore, we might frame the picture Derrida presents us with here as one in which concrete relationships precede abstract concepts. However, this does still not quite do justice to the dynamic picture Derrida allows us to draw here. On the one hand, Derrida accounts for the fact that no so-called concrete relationship is free from mediation by so-called abstract concepts. On the other hand, if we talk about the concrete here we should not understand this as the given. Rather, what Derrida shows is that nothing in the world ever loses the ability to surprise us, to overtake us in ways that we could not anticipate and that both require and reveal an engagement on our part. Derrida thus does not just work to break down any single and unbreachable limit between the human and the non-human. He also rethinks both what we call humans and non-humans in such a way as to allow them to emerge in their singularity again, i.e. not as instances of a certain general category, but as beings that constantly breach and resist any category we employ to understand them. It is this breaching that we can open ourselves to as a kind of questioning, and that can motivate a re-opening towards what we call non-human nature.
This would be an openness to a questioning by others, by any singular other (either through language or in the case of animals through gestures, forms of behavior, a gaze or simply the experience of another, and indeed, in the case of inanimate things, through their strange effects in the world) that we cannot reject and evade except in denying our own aporetic constitution. Something which would be un-just (in-juste) both in the sense of being untrue or inaccurate and in the sense of being unjust and unfair to those from whom this questioning comes.

To conclude, what we argued in this chapter is that for Derrida the potentially unlimited character of our responsibility is linked to the way he thinks the possibility of existence for anything and everything as an aporetic movement towards both sameness and alterity, both self-preservation and self-destruction. It is this movement that blocks any full determination of ourselves or of anything in the world and it is thus what constitutes the undecidable. There is an excess over any lawful repetition that can only be encountered performatively, i.e. in a way that decides in the absence of any determining rule and thus decides the undecidable. As we saw above, the undecidable, in turn, is what lies at the heart of the experience of free response as both a necessity and a non-sovereign possibility. It is thus what makes our relationship to the world never one that is simply theoretical, but always one of responsibility.

What we hope to have shown so far then is how Derrida’s conception of responsibility and our self-constitution makes any system or philosophy of responsibility that clearly excludes anything untenable. What I want to do in the following three chapters is to look beyond the impossibility of permanent exclusion at the way Derrida
might help us to make plausible the *possibility* of community with non-human nature and in particular with non-sentient, non-conscious or inanimate beings. These latter kinds of beings are particularly important both insofar as they form a significant part of what we call ‘the environment,’ and because it seems hard to imagine how we could have responsibilities towards inanimate entities except in an indirect fashion (i.e. insofar as they are valued by other conscious beings or insofar as they are created by a god).
CHAPTER 4

THE POSSIBILITY OF EXPERIENCING INANIMATE BEINGS AS OTHERS

What I argue in this as well as the following two chapters is that Derrida does not just show that we cannot conclusively exclude any kind of entity from the purview of moral responsibility and that it is irresponsible to maintain and tolerate structures, concepts and institutions that facilitate strict and emphatic exclusion. He also provides us with certain indications on how to understand the possibility of socio-ethical\(^1\) relationships with the more-than-human world and in particular with so-called inanimate

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\(^1\) By socio-ethical relationships I understand open-ended, normatively mediated and materially embedded relationships that involve the experience of another as a) inhabiting a shared world insofar as it/she/he acts in generally intelligible ways. At the same time, this other is experienced as b) irreducible to ‘my world’ or the categories of meaning and the singular relations that constitute my relationship to our shared world. The other is finally experienced as c) a participant in shaping and creating the norms that mediate our relationship and that constitute my experience of our world as shared. This corresponds to an experience of this other as able to respond in ways that exceed and affect any general categories and norm we could use to understand and anticipate this other’s behavior. This will be developed further below. The question of singularity will be of particular importance in the current chapter. We will return to the structure of sharing and exceeding my world in the concluding chapter 6.
220
natural2 entities. Through the account I develop here Derrida can also help us to account
for the plausibility of various animisms, which I take to be forms of community that
include certain kinds of non-human and even inanimate3 beings as tied to us through
relationships characterized not just by dependence, but also by mutual responsivity and
responsibility. Concerning animism or panpsychism, it is important to note that I do not
want to provide an account of any specific form of life that might be characterized as

Although the present argument does not target the term ‘natural’ as directly as the term “inanimate,” the
former term should still be used cautiously. Like the latter term, natural is here primarily used in its loose
conventional sense in order to designate the area of inquiry. This does not mean that we rely on (or think
possible) an exact definition of the natural that would draw an exact line between, say, the natural and the
cultural or the natural and the artificial. Indeed, the argument I propose here seems to be equally applicable
to so-called artificial entities. In using the term here, I do not claim that I have an exact definition of what
natural refers to, nor do I claim that what I say here cannot be applied to what we call artificial entities. The
only reason for me to use the term is that I am mainly interested in rethinking our relationships to entities
we usually refer to as natural and inanimate, such as hills, mountains, rocks, rivers etc. as opposed to tables,
cars or robots. Given my argument here, I would have to grant a certain kind of life to so-called artificial
entities as well. However, it stands to reason that the life of artificial entities (provided we want to maintain
this general category) would be different from that of so-called natural entities (just as the life of different
kinds of natural or artificial entities would be different). Establishing and fleshing out such a general
difference, though, would require a careful argument that I do not aim to provide here.
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Because we are aiming at establishing the possibility of socio-ethical relationships (i.e. normatively
mediated relationships characterized by responsivity and responsibility) with inanimate beings and because
this possibility is usually associated only with (certain) living beings, the argument here must proceed in a
certain hermeneutic circle. On the face of it, to claim that inanimate natural entities can be responsive and
possess an interiority of their own is trivially and analytically false given certain definitions of responsivity
(namely one distinguished from reaction), interiority (namely one that thinks of it in terms of a selfpresence absent to outside observers) and the inanimate (understood as that which merely reacts to an
outside world to the laws of which it would be, in principle, reducible): The inanimate, non-living cannot
be responsive based on an absent interiority by these definitions. Thus, the claim I make here about the
possibility of sharing a social world with inanimate beings understood as responsive participants in this
world, can ultimately only be borne out by developing different conceptions of the inanimate and of
responsivity, ones that are no longer simply opposed to the living and to reaction respectively. However,
any argument for such a conception must still begin by employing the traditional category of the inanimate
in order to designate its area of inquiry, but also to begin to understand the difficulties involved in
developing these different conceptions of life, of the inanimate, of response and interiority, conceptions that
put pressure on the category of the inanimate as simply, strictly and homogeneously opposed to the
animate.
For brevity’s sake I will employ conventional terminology in what follows and just refer to rocks,
rivers, mountains as well as chairs, cars or tables as inanimate entities, leaving out the ‘so-called’ for the
most part. However, the term (‘inanimate’) merely serves to designate the area of our inquiry here, not to
make any substantial or essentializing claim about the entities in question.


animist, nor suggest that the account I provide here could be the only valid one or that it can replace the accounts each animist community gives of its own relationships to what we call the non-human and inanimate world. Rather, I want to provide an account of the general plausibility of the inclusion of non-human and inanimate beings in our political and ethical communities and I want to do so by relying on certain aspects of non-animist Western philosophical discourse and do so for a non-animist Western readership.

I will briefly return to the question of animism at the end of chapter 6. However, I suggest that it is important throughout the next three chapters to keep in mind that the possibility of socio-ethical relationships to inanimate beings that we try to establish here is not a merely hypothetical possibility, but one that is realized by many cultures.

In the current chapter I argue for this possibility by relying again on Derrida's conception of différance and of the trace (which will be supplemented with Derrida's conceptions of living death and of world in the following two chapters). This conception, I argue, can help us to establish a parallel between Husserl's account of our experience of other minds in the *Cartesian Mediations* and our experience of non-conscious, non-sentient and even inanimate beings. It is through this parallel, I argue, that we can see that Derrida’s account of différance puts into question the strict distinction between conscious (in particular human) beings as beings with whom we can empathize and have social relationships, on the one hand, and non-conscious and, in particular, inanimate beings as beings with whom we can have no such relationships, on the other hand. Our relationships with the latter would be either instrumental (directed towards certain practical goals), theoretical (directed towards knowledge) or aesthetic (i.e. directed
towards a certain kind of sensible or spiritual experience). Against this division, I suggest that Derrida's account of différance can make plausible the possibility of empathic and social relationships with the natural world (including the inanimate) that we find realized to various extents and in different ways in many so-called animist cultures.  

After establishing the parallel between animate and inanimate beings in this chapter, I will then, in chapter 5, show how we can indeed see Derrida discuss the possibility of responsive and responsible, as well as socio-ethical relationships with inanimate entities and in particular corpses in *The Beast and the Sovereign*. I argue that Derrida's account of our experience of a corpse in *The Beast and the Sovereign* provides a template for an understanding of so-called inanimate natural entities as possessing a kind of responsivity and inaccessible interiority.  

What is particularly important in this context is the role Derrida attributes to what he calls a phantasm. This refers to a way of relating  

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4 The term animism is of course a very broad collective term and it is not clear that all cultures that are understood as animist fit one definition of what animism is. In this dissertation I will rely on Graham Harvey's definition of animisms (the plural indicating the way that the forms of life designated through this term exceed any one understanding of what animism means) as forms of community that include or allow for social relationships with non-human persons. It would be “minimally understood as the recognition of personhood in a range of human and other-than-human persons” (*Animism*, 18). A more robust and normatively charged definition (which would go beyond what Derrida can provide us with here) sees animisms as “theories, discourses and practices of relationship, of living well, of realising more fully what it means to be a person, and a human person, in the company of other persons, not all of whom are human but all of whom are worthy of respect.” (Ibid., xvii)  

5 The sense of this responsivity and interiority is to be further determined. However, for now we can already say that this interiority is experienced through a double movement of absence and presence. On the one hand, these entities are experienced as being able to affect us and to be affected by us. In this sense, they share a world with us. However, at the same time that which thus affects us and can be affected is not directly available to us in experience, i.e. not available with any degree of certain knowledge. In this sense, these entities can be experienced as not merely reacting (according to fully determinate and intelligible universal laws), but to respond based on a certain interior ‘life’ that remains absent to us. We will return to this concurrence of absence and presence, availability and unavailability, as the aporetic and simultaneous sharing and not sharing of a world below in chapter 6. See also below FN 45.
to another and to the world in the mode of a certain ‘as if,’ a mode which, as we will show, is characteristic of our relationship to the world in general.

Derrida’s conception of the phantasm and the ‘as if’ furthermore can help us to understand inanimate entities as beings with whom we can build and share a common world, something I will flesh out in the concluding chapter 6. It is there that I will return to the question of how this discussion of the corpse and the parallel between conscious and inanimate others can help us to understand the possibility of a more communal relationship with what Val Plumwood has called earth others.6 Such a possibility, I suggest, can be understood if we take seriously our ability to build a common world with all sorts of others (an ability which is based on the inability to ever keep any conception of or relationship to the world unitary, closed and whole vis-à-vis others). This would be a common world that is always based on a phantasm or an ‘as if.’ This, I presume, is one way to account for the possibility of social and ethical relationships between human and inanimate beings.7

The Singularity-Based Parallel Between Conscious and Inanimate Beings

What I want to argue in this chapter is that the possibility of conceiving of even inanimate entities as possessing a kind of independent interiority (i.e. an aspect of their

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6 Val Plumwood uses this term throughout *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* as well as *Environmental Culture* to refer to others (both animate and inanimate) we would categorize as belonging to non-human nature. See for example *Feminism*, 137.

7 Thus, we aim to provide a response to a more specific version of Jane Bennett’s question “Just how is it that bonding between human selves and ‘inanimate’ objects is possible?” that she asks in her essay “Powers of the Hoard” (243f.). In the essay she traces what she calls the “‘calling’ capacity” of things in general along the lines of their “activeness” and “vitality.” In particular, she focuses on the ability of so-called hoarders to see inanimate things very differently than non-hoarders.
existence that is in principle inaccessible to us) as well as an understanding of the possibility of social relationships with so-called inanimate things hinges on a real feature of our relationship to the world. This real feature can be described as a parallel between our experience of those beings we consider ‘ensouled,’ i.e. endowed with the inner life of consciousness or at least sentience, on the one hand, and of those beings contemporary Western thought establishes as lacking both consciousness and sentience, on the other hand. For the sake of convenience, I will below refer to the former group as animate and the latter group as inanimate. The parallel can be established based on Derrida's account of différance. This account allows us to conceive even of inanimate entities, first, as possible objects of empathy and, second and relatedly, as potentially social beings. They designate objects of empathy (broadly construed) insofar as they can be understood as loci of distinct alternative relationships to a shared world that we can meaningfully imaginatively approximate in an analogizing experience. However, because these loci are given to us as precisely beyond our experiential horizons we can never relate to these entities in merely theoretical ways or merely as objects of knowledge. Instead, our relationships to them are always also practical (something we already began to see in part I), i.e. they are characterized by and oriented towards normatively guided, but open-ended, and materially embedded interactions rather than towards conclusive knowledge

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8 I.e. most human beings, many animals and, possibly, certain plants.

9 I.e. all inanimate entities, possibly all non-animal forms of life as well as certain animals.

10 Imagination, as we will see below, will here be understood very broadly through the notion of the phantasm or the ‘as if’ as experience insofar as it involves a constructive or creative element that lacks an ultimate foundation and exceeds (but also is constitutive of) what is given. In this sense, imagination would mark an aspect of any form of experience.
of an object by a subject based on theoretical evaluations of specific controlled situations. It is based on this practical aspect that we can understand the possibility of inanimate beings as social beings, i.e. beings with which (or, possibly, with whom) we can build some kind of community based on a shared world, something I will focus on in the concluding chapter 6. As potential parts of such a community (and, like any community, such a community would always be fragile and its maintenance require labor) these beings would not simply designate a set and fixed stage of human action. They would not be mere objects for knowledge, manipulation, consumption or aesthetic enjoyment. Rather, the potential for community designates them as beings that (or who) are recognized as potential participants in the construction of shared norms. In experiencing them as such participants our relationship with them could not be permanently rooted in a specific set of norms, but would require and aim towards constant practical (re-)negotiation. It would also involve recognizing the possibility that they can adapt to us (some more, some less) and that we can adapt to them.

In this chapter, I establish the above-mentioned parallel between conscious and inanimate beings by arguing that the basic structure that Husserl describes for our experience of other people can be extended to include inanimate entities. This basic structure consists in the way that we experience others only as present in a way that also leaves something about them in principle absent. This indicates the impossibility to achieve conclusive knowledge of another person,\footnote{And, as we will see in the last section below, this also applies to ourselves insofar as we relate to ourselves as others.} or that any knowledge we do have of
another is always only conclusive for specific practical purposes, i.e. conclusive for purposes that are established based on the facticity of our specific individual and social relations to and engagements with the world. This relative inconclusiveness is something I refer to as epistemic fragility.

I will first outline this constitutive feature of our experience of other people as presented by Husserl. Next, I show how epistemic fragility is rooted in ontological difference. I then develop how that which cannot be experienced or known in someone distinct from myself is the singular way they relate to the world. Following this, I argue that this structure of presence *qua* absence can be generalized to include non-conscious, non-sentient and even non-living beings based on Derrida's notion of différance. This will serve me as the basis of chapters 5 and 6, where I will show how this can be understood as accounting for the possibility of empathic and social relationship even with inanimate entities in particular based on Derrida's account of our experience of the corpse and of the world in *The Beast and the Sovereign*.

**The Experience of Another According to Husserl**

In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl provides a phenomenological account of the experience of other conscious beings, or our ‘experience of another’ (*Fremderfahrung*). For my purposes I only want to focus on one specific formal or structural feature of this experience. What I mean by structural or formal here is that I am going to focus on the way this experience is structured or the form in which another is given (namely, as we will see, as present *qua* absent) as opposed to the specific content of our experience of another.
The formal feature I have in mind is the fact that we do not have direct access to another person's consciousness. I have no way of making another person's experience present within my own consciousness in the way it is given to that person.\textsuperscript{12} I can, for instance, understand when someone tells me they are really looking forward to the Bobby McFerrin concert, but I cannot feel and experience their joyful excitement in the way they are experiencing it. I do of course, according to Husserl, have direct access to the way I look forward to this concert. Thus, the indirect experience of another person's consciousness is, according to Husserl, in contrast to the presumably immediate access we have to our own experience.\textsuperscript{13}

It seems that the only way I can experience another person's consciousness is as mediated through the directly observable behaviors and actions of another's body.\textsuperscript{14} For

\textsuperscript{12} Husserl, \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, 109 (111). Although we can experience another as real embodied presence (“leibhaftig”), we nevertheless have to admit “that, properly speaking, neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes [or lived experiences: \textit{Erlebnisse}, T.B.] or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally” (“dass dabei eigentlich nicht das andere Ich selbst, nicht seine Erlebnisse, seine Erscheinungen selbst, nichts von dem, was seinem Eigenwesen selbst angehört, zu ursprünglicher Gegebenheit komme.”).

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 119(122), where Husserl talks about “[m]ein eigenes Ego, das in ständiger Selbstwahrnehmung gegeben.” (“[m]ein eigenes Ego, das in ständig der Selbstwahrnehmung gegebene.”). See also ibid., 114 (117) where Husserl writes: “Whatever can become presented, and evidently verified, originally is something I am; or else it belongs to me as peculiarly my own.” (“Was je original präsentierbar und ausweisbar ist, das bin ich selbst bzw. Gehört zu mir selbst als Eigenes.”).

\textsuperscript{14} Husserl refers to this as a “certain mediacy of intentionality” (\textit{Cartesian Meditations}, 109(112): “gewisse Mittelbarkeit der Intentionalität”), which however should not be mistaken for the need to infer the existence of another. “[I]t by no means follows that there would by an inference from analogy. Apperception is not inference, not a thinking act.” (ibid. 111/113: “keineswegs ein Analogieschluss. Apperzeption ist kein Schluss, kein Denkakt.”). This is insofar as that which is given here as mediate (i.e. not directly given) is nevertheless immediately given with the perception of another's lived body, i.e. given without any delay and not requiring any act of reflection. Thus Husserl writes: “The experienced animate organism [\textit{Leib}] of another continues to prove itself as actually an animate organism [i.e. a lived body (\textit{Leib}) rather than a mere inanimate physical body (\textit{Körper}, T.B.), solely in its changing but incessantly harmonious ‘behavior.’ Such harmonious behavior (as having a physical side that indicates something psychic appresentatively) must present itself fulfillingly in original experience, and do so throughout the continuous change in behavior from phase to phase. The organism becomes experienced as a pseudo-organism, precisely if there is something discordant about its behavior.” (ibid. 114(117): “Der erfahrene fremde Leib bekundet sich
instance, I experience somebody as looking forward to the Bobby McFerrin concert if they do a little dance every time somebody mentions it. Thus, it would seem that I can never truly know another person's state of mind or even whether I am not just dealing with a mindless robot.

In Husserl's view, however, this seemingly indirect character of our experience of another person's consciousness does not disqualify this experience as epistemically unreliable. This is insofar as the indirect character of my experience of another is not by itself sufficient reason to doubt the existence or expression of another person's mind. It just marks it as epistemically challenging and indeed fragile. This is insofar as knowledge of other minds requires continued and open-ended engagement that must remain open to revision and renegotiation in a way that, say, a mathematical proof does not.

This also means that the fact that we experience another person only through the way her body appears and acts in the world is not seen as a contingent epistemic limitation. This is because the experience of another's consciousness is only conceivable in this so-called indirect fashion. There is no such thing as the direct, dis-embodied experience of another's consciousness, any more than there is a square circle. The idea of a direct experience of another's consciousness is a non-sensical one. Husserl writes: “[I]f

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fortgesetzt wirklich als Leib nur in seinem wechselnden, aber immerfort zusammenstimmenden 'Gebaren', derart, dass diese seine physische Seite hat, die Psychisches appäsentierend indiziert, das nun in originaler Erfahrung erfüllend auftreten muss. Und so im stetigen Wechsel des Gebaren von Phase zu Phase. Der Leib wird als Schein-Leib erfahren, wenn es damit eben nicht stimmt.”

15 Thus, the other ego is “constitute[d]” (“konstituiert”) through an “appresentative apperception, which, according to its intrinsic nature, never demands [or requires: fordert, T.B.] and never is open to [or allows for: zulässt, T.B.] fulfilment by presentation.” (“appräsentative Apperzeption…, die ihrer Eigenart gemäß nie Erfüllung durch Präsentation fordert oder zulässt.”) (ibid., 119(122)).
what belongs to the other's own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.”

In other words, what we might suppose to be a higher form of knowledge of others, one that makes another person fully present in my experience, would in fact describe conditions that completely undermine the possibility of the experience of another consciousness. Conversely, the experiential conditions that we often describe and indeed experience as the impossibility of really experiencing others, designate the only way we can experience others. They make the experience of another possible, but only possible as impossible, i.e. possible in a way that makes our experience of another always fragile, never fully secure, confirmed and present. Thus, another person can only be experienced as present qua absent, or accessible as inaccessible.

Now, put this way, we can see the experience of another consciousness to be an instance of what Derrida, as we already said in the previous chapter, sometimes calls quasi-transcendental structures. While transcendental structures designate the conditions of possibility for something, quasi-transcendental structures are structures that

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16 Ibid., 109(111); emphasis mine: “Wäre das der Fall, wäre das Eigenwesentliche des Anderen in direkter Weise zugänglich, so wäre es bloß Moment meines Eigenwesens, und schließlich er selbst und ich selbst einerlei.”

17 One way that Husserl describes this presence qua absence is when he writes for example: “The character of the existent ‘other’ has its basis in this kind of verifiable accessibility of what is not originally accessible.” (Ibid., 114(117): “In dieser Art bewährbarer Zugänglichkeit des original Unzugänglichen gründet der Charakter des seiernden ‘Fremden’.”).

18 See above chapter 3, FN 3.

19 Derrida, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism.” 83f.(158-160). See also Resistances, 29(44).
simultaneously are the conditions of possibility and of impossibility for something. Specifically, they are structures that, on the one hand, allow for the experience and the identity of something (thus making it possible) while also inhibiting the experience and existence of this same thing as fully present and completely self-identical (thus making it impossible).

What is relevant here for our question concerning the independent interiority of inanimate beings is that Derrida generalizes this structure of presence *qua* absence, discerning it in our relationship to the world in general.

**The Link Between Ontological Difference and Epistemic Fragility**

In order to show how this is the case, I now want to briefly indicate how Husserl – in designating another person as constitutively present *qua* absent – allows us to understand the problem of other minds as primarily an ontological rather than an epistemic issue. Again, here is what Husserl says about the impossibility to imagine a direct experience of another person's consciousness, but this time with a slightly different emphasis: “[I]f what belongs to the other's own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.”

I suggest that there are two ways to frame this statement, one epistemological, one ontological. From an epistemological vantage point we could say the following: in what we imagine to be the direct experience of another, we think we experience one thing (i.e. another person) but we actually experience another (i.e. myself). However, we could also

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20 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 109(111); changed emphasis mine. See above FN 16.
frame this in ontological terms: the ultimate criterion for something's *being* another consciousness is that I cannot access it directly. Another consciousness is not *not* directly accessible because it is somehow hidden and we are victims of some contingent epistemic impediment. Rather, what we perceive as an epistemic impediment merely reflects the fact that we are experiencing something that *is another* consciousness.

I suggest that the latter, ontological reading provides us with the basis for the former, epistemic reading. In other words, Husserl, in the above quote, effectively shifts the framing of the problem of other minds in a way that shows the ontological undergirding of a presumably purely epistemological problem. Another person's consciousness is not directly available to experience *not* because we only possess imperfect knowledge of it,\(^{21}\) but because that is what it is to be another consciousness. In other words, it is not that we underperform as knowers in our experience of others.

Rather, another person's consciousness, in its otherness, is not the kind of thing that lends itself to evaluation through an epistemic framework that has certainty and conclusiveness as its core requirements.\(^{22}\) What we experience as the fragility of our knowledge of

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21. The reason why this is often seen as a *merely* epistemic problem (for example in the form of other-mind skepticism) is that the epistemic challenges this indeed *creates* (but that are not identical with the indirect character of my experience of another mind) are thought to be rooted in a more basic epistemic problem that would allow for an epistemic solution. In other words, the principled experiential absence of another consciousness is thought of as an epistemic problem when we think that another consciousness is the kind of thing we could experience and know in the same way we experience and know our own consciousness. What I (drawing on Husserl) suggest, however, is that the principled absence of another person's lived experience is not itself an epistemic problem insofar as it does not allow for an epistemic solution. There is nothing that it is like to experience another consciousness directly. The absence in question merely underlies epistemic problems such as those relating to issues like testimony and trust. These kinds of problems can indeed partly be addressed by thinking about proper epistemic procedures. However, these procedures must always take into consideration embodiment.

22. Thus, Stanley Cavell, in *The Claim of Reason* (see especially part IV and his discussion of Othello's murder of Desdemona (482-496)), sees the application of such a framework to our interactions with other minds not simply or primarily as a theoretical mistake, but as an ethical or practical failure. This is insofar
another person is the fact that I am not this other consciousness, or in other words: epistemic fragility (understood here as the impossibility of permanent and conclusive knowledge) tracks ontological difference. So the reason that we do not know others is precisely that they are other. They are external to and distinct from us.

Singularity as the Root of Alterity

I will now outline a Derridean account of the link between ontological difference and epistemic fragility. This account will allow us to generalize this experience of epistemic fragility understood as the experience of something as present qua absent beyond animate (by which I mean conscious and sentient) beings. What I argue, in other words, is that even in my experience of, say, a rock or a piece of wax there is something that remains, in principle, inaccessible to experience. In order to make this generalization, I will return to Derrida's account of différance that we already talked about in the previous two chapters.

What I suggest, in a nutshell, is the following: the difference between myself and another is the difference between two singular beings. Moreover, I argue that experience is always conditioned (i.e. enabled and shaped) by my own singular existence in the world, while another person's experience is conditioned by hers. It is because I cannot access the singularity that constitutes another person's experience that I cannot access another person's experience in a way that would be direct and thus conclusive.

as the desire for knowledge that is certain in this context reflects a flight from the conditions of our existence with others and, specifically, from our responsibility to build and maintain relationships with others (for example through the cultivation of trust, love or forgiveness) in the absence of the locally certain knowledge that for example a mathematical proof could provide us with.
A Brief Reminder About the Ontological Difference in Question

As we flesh this out, it is important to keep in mind that the ontological difference we are interested in here is not the neutral difference between two objects. Rather, we are talking about the asymmetrical difference between my consciousness and another consciousness, i.e. the difference between my lived experience and the lived experience of another \textit{insofar as the latter is somewhat accessible in my lived experience}. This is a difference which we can frame as the difference between self and non-self, same and other, internal and external. On the one hand, this is important insofar as it shows that the experience of another can be understood through the notion of différance, which (as we already argued in chapter 3 above) concerns the necessary and aporetic interplay between same and other exemplified for example in the relation between self and world, but also self and other (self). We will return to différance later when it is a question of generalizing the structure of our experience of another. On the other hand, and relatedly, the asymmetrical character of the ontological difference in question is important to keep in mind in order to resist the assumption that we could in principle fully understand another's lived experience, something we tend to assume if we just frame the problem as the neutral difference between two individual instances of consciousness. Designating both instances of lived experience\textsuperscript{23} through the same word (‘consciousness’) might yield

\textsuperscript{23} Generally, ‘lived experience’ is a less misleading term than ‘consciousness’ because it carries less of a temptation to think it in substantial terms – as does Husserl’s German term which, if we go with the literal meaning of the words that constitute it, could also be translated as just being-conscious (or consciousness: \textit{Bewusst-sein}).
a case of the linguistic enchantment Wittgenstein warned against. This is insofar as it suggests that we are dealing with two items of the same kind, two tokens of the same type. This, in turn, invites the thought that we could, in theory, also be the other consciousness and experience what another experiences in the way they do, or that we could meaningfully (i.e. in a way that in principle allows for phenomenological fulfillment) think the possibility of experiencing what another experiences in the way she does. However, what Husserl's insistence on the alterity of another indicates and what Derrida will further emphasize and account for by framing alterity in terms of singularity (and, as we will see later, in terms of mourning, phantasm and imagination) is the

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24 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 40(41), par. 109: “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language.” (”Die Philosophie ist ein Kampf gegen die Verhexung unsres Verstandes durch die Mittel unserer Sprache.”).

25 A poetic illustration of why such an assumption is problematic, and why the asymmetrical distinction between self and non-self matters here, can be found in Frank Wedekind's poem The Prisoner (Der Gefangene) (Wedekind, *Gedichte*, I, 29; translation mine):

> Oftmals hab ich nachts im Bette (Oftentimes I have at night in bed)
> Schon gegrübelt hin und her. (pondered back and forth)
> Was es denn geschadet hätte, (what harm it would have done)
> Wenn mein Ich ein anderer wär. (if I were another)

> Höhnisch raunten meine Zweifel (scornfully my doubts did whisper)
> Mir die tolle Antwort zu: (to me the crazy answer)
> Nichts geschadet, dummer Teufel, (no harm at all, stupid devil)
> Denn der andre wärest du! (because the other would be you!)

> Hilflos wälzt ich mich im Bette (Helplessly I tossed and turned in bed)
> Und entrang mir dies Gedicht, (and struggled to write this poem here)
> Rasselnd mit der Sklavenkette, (rattling with the slave chain)
> Die kein Denker je zerbricht. (that no thinker ever breaks)

26 I do not necessarily want to suggest that we could not make the argument I propose here on Husserlian grounds. However, Derrida's thinking, with its emphasis on alterity and singularity, lends itself more easily to the kind of argument I propose here than Husserl's thinking with its emphasis on what is phenomenologically verifiable (although Husserl, as Derrida knows, is well aware of the absences that characterize our experience).
following: the difference between myself and another to whom I relate implies an unbridgeable difference between the ways we experience and know the world (which also means, as we will see later, that ‘the world’ in its presumed singularity is always a construct). This is not just to say that we can never know or cognitively grasp everything about a person in its totality. Rather, I want to make the stronger claim that we can never experience or know anything that another person experiences or knows in quite the same way, i.e. in a way that would preclude any possible future disagreements about the thing experienced or known.

Another as Singular

In order to begin to see how this is the case, I want to return to a passage from The Gift of Death that I already looked at in chapter 2 in order to establish the strong link between alterity and singularity. What I suggest here is that what we find in this passage is what we might call Derrida's version of the link between epistemic fragility and ontological difference, a link we established above with recourse to Husserl. Derrida expresses this thought somewhat differently and in a more condensed form when he writes “Every [or ‘each,’ T.B.] other is completely [or absolutely, T.B.] other.”

This is a version of Husserl's claim insofar as it establishes a universal relation (“every other”) between ontological alterity and alterity insofar as it is epistemically irreducible. Now, part of what is meant here by complete or absolute otherness is the

27 Derrida, Gift of Death, 68(98): “Every other (one) is every (bit) other [tout autre est tout autre], everyone else is completely or wholly other.”

28 The question of what is meant by ‘absolute alterity’ here arises in particular because Derrida does not deny the possibility of communication and given the fact that Derrida had criticized Levinas in Violence
inaccessibility of another person's lived experience that we already saw in Husserl's account – and Derrida explicitly refers to Husserl in this context: “[E]ach of us, everyone else, each other is…inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my ego.”29 However, beyond this account, Derrida takes this complete otherness to indicate that “each other is infinitely other in his absolute singularity.”30 In other words, “toute autre est toute autre [Every other is wholly other, T.B.] signifies every other is singular, that everything [or everyone: tout, T.B.] is a singularity.”31

I suggest that we can understand this focus on singularity as follows. What constitutes someone as other in our experience is the way that they fundamentally exceed the general categories of meaning that we, at the same time, must deploy to understand them as a specific other, i.e. somebody who can be described in terms of certain general features (tall, irritable, generous, human etc.). This excess is what marks them not just as other, but precisely as singular insofar as our general categories are general insofar as they are repeatable over different contexts. Thus, what resists description in terms of these general categories is unrepeatable or it is singular.

Again: Différance and the Trace

As we already saw above in chapter 2, we must understand this singularity aporetically as emerging as the interruption of the repetitive structures that constitute us

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29 See for example Gift of Death, 78(110). See above chapter 2, FN 71.
30 Ibid.
31 See Gift of Death, 87(121). See above chapter 2, FN 72.
as one thing rather than another. This is the operation of différance as indicating the way that nothing can ever be understood as being fully self-identical. As we furthermore already began to see above, this operation of différance or of the singular breaks that affect any repetitive structures (including the multiple levels of identity that we can discern within ourselves) is what relates us to an outside, to something other. “Différance is reference and vice versa.”32 As we said, différance indicates a “relation to an impossible presence.”33 Another way Derrida refers to this “impossible presence” is the “presence-absence”34 of the trace or the archi-trace. And the trace, the operation of which is another way to describe the operation of différance, is precisely the trace of another.35 It is what allows for any relation to an outside or something exterior (including the relation to an outside we call experience) and marks this relation before36 or independently of the way we divide others according to oppositional categories such as “nature and culture” or “animality and humanity”37 or – to use a category important for


33 Derrida, “Différance,” 19(20), see above chapter 3, FN 49.

34 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 71(103f.): “The presence-absence of the trace, which one should not even call its ambiguity but rather its play (for the word ‘ambiguity’ requires the logic of presence, even when it begins to disobey that logic), carries in itself the problems of the letter and the spirit, of body and soul, and of all the problems whose primary affinity I have recalled.” (“La présence-absence de la trace, ce qu’on ne devrait même pas appeler son ambiguïté mais son jeu (car le mot ‘ambiguïté’ requiert la logique de la présence, même quand il commence à y désobéir), porte en soi les problèmes de la lettre et de l’esprit, du corps et de l’âme et de tous les problèmes dont nous avons rappelé l’affinité première.”).

35 Of Grammatology, 47(69), where Derrida talks about the trace as the place “where the relationship with the other is marked” (“où se marque le rapport à l’autre.”). See below FN 50.

36 And this is not a temporal before and one that is operative (but only as disappearing in the necessary application of our general categories) at any moment.

37 Of Grammatology, 70(103): “If the trace, arche-phenomenon of ‘memory,’ which must be thought before the opposition of nature and culture, animality and humanity, etc., belongs to the very movement of signification, then signification is a priori written, whether inscribed or not, in one form or another, in a
animism – persons and objects. It is because the trace relates us to another, to an outside before any such specific categories and because it is what opens any presumably closed identity towards an outside that Derrida refers to the trace as “the opening of the first exteriority in general.” For us, experiencing and living things, it is that which allows anything other than us to be or to acquire the status of being as we relate to it. It is “the enigmatic [or, as we will see later, fantasmatic, T.B.] relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside.” This ‘outside’, this “exteriority…we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself,” or, we might say, as the common sense or reality of the world. On the one hand, the trace constitutes the possibility of this familiarity of the outside to the point that “[a]ll reality,” as Derrida says later, “has the structure of a differential trace.” However, on the other hand, the trace – because it is only available as a “presence-absence” or (like another) “produces itself as

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38 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70f.(103): “[T]his trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing. The outside, ‘spatial’ and ‘objective’ exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the gramè, without differance as temporalization, without the nonprensent of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present.” (“[C]ette trace est l'ouverture de la première extériorité en général, l'éénigmatique rapport du vivant à son autre et d'un dedans à un dehors: l'espacement. Le dehors, extérieurité ‘spatiale’ et ‘objective’ dont nous croyons savoir ce qu'elle est comme la chose la plus familière du monde, comme la familiarité elle-même, n'apparaîtrait pas sans le gramme, sans la differance comme temporalisation, sans la non-présence de l'autre inscrite dans le sens du présent, sans le rapport à la mort comme structure concrète du présent vivant.””

39 Ibid.


41 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 71(103f.). See above FN 34.
self-occultation” and because it can be understood as the singularity that exceeds our general, repeatable categories of meaning – cannot itself be understood through this familiarity and indeed disturbs the presence of the very reality it makes also possible (similar to the way it would be the condition of any world qua externality, while simultaneously undermining the possibility of the world qua totality). Now, insofar as we can understand the operation of différance as the interminable interplay between same and other, inside and outside as well as repetition and singularity, we can understand anything as involving an aspect of singularity in its very constitution.

Understanding Singularity Through Différence

What I thus suggest based on the universal operation of différance and the trace as constituting any relation between inside and outside or same and other and, in particular,

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42 Ibid., 47(69): “But the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted, it produces itself as self-occultation. When the other announces itself as such, it presents itself in the dissimulation of itself.” (“Mais le mouvement de la trace est nécessairement occulté, il se produit comme occultation de soi. Quand l'autre s'annonce comme tel, il se présente dans la dissimulation de soi.”).

43 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 61(90). Derrida writes that the trace as originary, as archi-trace, “is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity” (“est en effet contradictoire et irrecevable dans la logique de l'identité.”). It would not derive from “the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or from an originary nontrace.” (“schéma classique qui la ferait dériver d'une présence ou d'une non-trace originaire.”).

44 The world would here be the exteriority that alone allows for any interiority understood through and as a self-relation (although it does so only in a process of infinite deferral). See for example Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 88(138). See above chapter 3, FN 35, 56.

45 See for example Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 8f.(30-32) where Derrida indicates a certain irreducible fracturing of the world by holding that while humans and animals “incontestably” (incontestablement) inhabit the same world, they also inhabit different worlds and that indeed each individual inhabits a different world. See below chapter 6, FN 32. This corresponds to Derrida’s famous dictum that each death is each time the end of the world (see for example Derrida, “Rams,” 140(23)). Thus, Sean Gaston, as we already partly indicated above (see above chapter 3, FN 10), argues that for Derrida, even though we always aim to establish a certain unity of the world, “there is always more than one world” and that, for Derrida, “there is the possibility that there is no world.” (The Concept of World, 132). In this sense, we would have the same relationship of the “I don’t know” to it that characterizes the phantasm.
as constituting experience as a relation to something other, i.e. a relation to something that, in this relation, remains also absent in its singularity, is the following: when Derrida talks about the singularity of another or that every other is a singularity, this should not just be understood one-sidedly as the singular way that we first come to experience another as other (namely insofar the repetitive structures that constitute our identities are always vulnerable towards an outside that interrupts this repetition in a way that can only be singular). It is not just that another always appears to us or relates to us as singular.

Rather, we should take seriously when Derrida says that every other is a singularity. And I suggest that we understand this singularity of another through the singularity that marks another's multiple relations to what is exterior or to what we call and experience as the world.

Specifically, I suggest that we understand this singularity that is another not just as the uniqueness of certain structures of identity as they persist (and thus repeat) over time. If this were all that was meant by singularity, we could still in principle understand it through repeatable categories. Rather, this singularity needs to be understood precisely through the operation of différance, i.e. through the way that this other does and cannot simply repeat its identity-constituting structures over time. Rather, these repetitions constituting the self-sameness of another human (or non-human) being must be understood as always imperfect and thus affected by what is singular or other. Another (just as myself in my vulnerability and openness towards an outside) is thus constituted through always imperfect repetitions that allow for relations to something else (including myself, i.e. another who experiences this person). Importantly then, these relations to an
outside that constitute another are singular not just insofar as they exceed the repetitive structures that constitute me (i.e. the experiencing thing or subject), but also insofar as they exceed the repetitive structures constitutive of another (the experienced person). In this sense, i.e. in its/her/his constitution through différance, another is indeed a (dynamic and complex) singularity.

This means that what opens me towards another (the impossibility to simply persist in a closed identity) is also what opens another towards myself and what opens both of us towards a world, but in such a way as to never make the world or another simply present. Thus, this structure is what singularly relates another to the world qua exteriority. However, because of the singularity of everyone's and everything's relation to the exteriority that we call ‘the world,’ différance does so in a way that always exceeds this world understood as a shared world, i.e. as a world understood through the repetitive categories constructed through intersubjective interactions. This is something we will return to in chapter 6 as the way we simultaneously do and do not share a world with others.

Others as Complex Relational Singularities

What I thus propose is that we understand the singularity of another person (and ultimately the singularity of every other, every identifiable entity outside of us) as complex and relational, and that the difference between myself and another is thus a difference between such complex relational singularities. By “complex relational singularity” I mean the unique ways that each of us are constituted through a multiplicity of ever changing and singular relationships to our environments. I say environments,
plural, because this relational constitution can be discerned on multiple levels of identity (person, organism, physical body etc.). This is how we can understand ourselves as constituted by différance. This is, as we saw above in chapter 3, because différance should not just be understood in terms of postponement, but as a relation to something, a relation that cannot be postponed, but also not conclusively comprehended. It is thus a relation to an impossible presence. This impossible presence, as we said, can be understood in terms of alterity which in turn must be understood as singular. Thus, complex relational singularity can be understood as follows.

Each of our levels of identities (personal, animal, physical) must be understood as relational insofar as each such identity is constituted through a multiplicity of singular relations to the exteriority of certain contexts or environments. We cannot, for example, understand ourselves as organisms without also considering all the ways we interact with and are changed by our environments (think, for instance, of our metabolism or the way in which we relate to the world in terms of certain desires and fears). The same is true for ourselves as experiencing subjects, something which cannot be understood through the notion of a purely observing subject that remains unaffected by what it observes. Rather, experience is also always a relation that involves change on the side of the subject – something which, for example, accounts for the possibility of trauma.

This emphasis on relationality is crucial here because it helps us to understand why the singularity of another resists clear identification in terms of meaningful experience based on general categories – something we will explain further below with reference to the notion of context. This is because relationality is another way to describe
the operation of différance insofar as it indicates that our identities are never quite stable because they ever so slightly change as we relate to other entities and contexts. We cannot think a metabolism for example without thinking change in the organism. Likewise, we cannot think experience as merely a passive taking in by something that remains unchanged by what it experiences. It is these singular changes that provide us with one way to understand the resistance to identification through general repeatable categories we encounter in another. This, in turn, is what makes another's singular existence inaccessible to experience.

In more theoretical terms, we can think about this as the fact that we, on the one hand, are constituted in our existence by our relations (or, as we put it in part I, by the self-dividing opening towards an outside is what makes something One). I cannot understand myself as a person without also understanding, say, the way I relate to (i.e. exist and act within) a specific socio-historical context. These relations, in turn, are always singular in that they precisely determine me in the way I exist at any given moment and in ways that cannot be captured by general categories.

However, on the other hand, in identifying a thing (with recourse to certain repeatable categories such as human, animal, animate, inanimate, etc.), we need to determine the thing as separate and separable from its various environments (and this is another way to understand the violence of determination and unity we discussed at the end of chapter 3). We cannot consider all the ways that a thing is constituted by its relations without ending in an infinite regress.46 If, for example, I consider all the ways

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46 There is furthermore a degree of undecidability in what exactly I identify as one things rather than another, or where I locate the cut-off point between a thing (and the internal relations that structure it) and
that I am constituted by the people in my life, I would also have to consider all the ways that these people in turn are constituted by others (including myself), and so on. But this means that in determining a thing, we precisely exclude all the singular relations that make a thing what it is in its singularity. Indeed, such an exclusion is the only way that meaningful experience of a thing as a certain *kind of individual* is possible. This is because the general categories we use to identify a thing can only operate as general by being applicable over different contexts. They thus focus on (practically) relevant similarities to the exclusion of the way that each thing is unique in the way it exists in and is open towards that which is exterior to, but nevertheless constitutive of, it.

Thus, what must escape us in experiencing another as a certain *kind* of person (and indeed in experiencing anything as a certain *kind* of thing) is the singular way they exist as relational. Now, as we indicated above, we can understand experience precisely as rooted in the singular ways we relate to the world. This is not all that experience is, but it is what first enables it and it is what makes it mine (although only in a way that also relates me to something other and that makes what I experience never quite available to me). What this means concerning our experience of other persons is that the absence of another's lived experience can be understood as the absence of another's complex relational singularity or the absence of their experience as *theirs*. By contrast, another is present not insofar as she has a body, but insofar as that body acts in (intersubjectively

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the things it relates to through merely accidental relations. This also means that identification is a locus of responsibility. See also below chapter 6, FN 9.
and historically constituted) generally intelligible and identifiable ways\textsuperscript{47} (but ways which are nevertheless always open to mis- and thus re-interpretation, which is what marks the absence at the heart of this presence). So if somebody jumps up and does a little dance, this usually indicates joy, but it does not have to. What thus escapes us in the otherness of another's experience is the complex relational singularity that constitutes this experience qua relationship to an outside.

What this means is that, for Derrida, the absence at the root of our experience of another is not so much the absence of a specific phenomenally given experiential content that could be in principle available to me (just not, as Husserl has pointed out, as that of another). It is in other words, not just the absence of the experience of, say, this table as one that I could, in principle, have as well, just not here and now and not as another's. Rather, what is in principle absent to me is your singular experiential relationship to the bottle, or the singularity of your existence that underlies and ever so slightly changes any presumably general content of this experience, such as the general content ‘table.’

The general structure we can thus discern in our experience of others is the following. Another consciousness is only given to me in a generally meaningful experience by also being, simultaneously, absent in the singular ways it relates to the exteriority of the world understood through the general experiential content that is shared, constructed and maintained with others for a variety of narrower or wider practical purposes. This is usually thought of as merely the absence of experiential content as

\textsuperscript{47} This is what Husserl means when he talks about the “\textit{verifiable} accessibility of what is not originally accessible” (\textit{Cartesian Meditations}, 114(117); emphasis mine. See above FN 17).
phenomenally given. However, this latter absence is rooted in the principled inaccessibility of another in their singularity. This singularity conditions any presumably universal content of experience insofar as such content must always be understood in relation to the singularity of another. This is because such singularity marks the way another is open to or relates to something outside herself and thus marks the condition of the other's lived experience. I cannot, then, experience what you are experiencing directly because your experience is yours precisely insofar as it emerges through and as your singular relationships to the world – for example as your relationship to this table rather than mine. And while Derrida, unlike Husserl, would say that my own relationships to the world in their singularity also cannot be subject to an immediate meaningful (i.e. generally intelligible) experience, these relationships are mine precisely insofar as they first open the possibility of any experiential relationship to the world or to myself (insofar as such a relationship presupposes a division into self and other or experiencing and experienced).

**Generalizing the Experience of Another as Presence qua Absence**

As we might have already suspected based on the above-mentioned designation of the trace as the “opening of the first exteriority in general,”

48 for Derrida this structure of presence qua absence is not limited to our experience of other conscious beings. Rather, it describes the conditions for experience in general: everything can be experienced only as present qua absent insofar as its singular relational existence in the context of the exteriority that we call the world exceeds the general categories that constitute any

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48 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70(103); emphasis mine. See above FN 37.
experience *qua* general making present. In other words, the interplay of presence/absence, sameness/alterity and repeatability/singularity describes the necessary structure of any relationship we might have to the exteriority of the world or to anything other we encounter within this world (which also means that nothing is ever simply contained within the world as a space of possible meaning). It “covers the totality of what one can call experience or the relation to something in general.”\(^49\) Thus, Derrida says that the operation of the trace “articulates its possibility in the entire field of being.”\(^50\)

\(^49\) This is something Derrida says about iterability which designates the fact that there is no perfect repetition because each repetition also always contains something singular insofar as it is in a new context. Iterability marks not simply the “repeatability of the same, but rather alterability of this idealized same [*mêmes idéalisé*] in the singularity of the event.” (“Afterword,” 119(215f.); translation modified: “récitéabilité du même, mais altérabilité de ce même idéalisé dans la singularité de l’événement.”). It marks the way that “[t]here 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” (ibid., 119(216): “Il n'y a pas d'idéalisation sans itérabilité (identifiante), mais pour la même raison, en raison de l'itérabilité (altérante), il n'y a pas d'idéalisation tenue pure, à l'abri de route contamination.”). Importantly, this does not just apply to language. Rather, it describes (although it is not limited to) any intentional experience. “It does not cover this alone, but it does cover in particular what is called intentional experience. It is presupposed by all intentionality (conscious or not, human or not).” (ibid., 129(235): “Elle ne couvre pas seulement mais elle couvre en particulier ce qu'on appelle l'expérience intentionnelle. Elle est présupposée par toute intentionnalité (consciente ou non, humaine ou non).”). Iterability can be seen as one way to describe the general interplay between repetition and singularity, “the rule and the event, concept and singularity” (ibid., 119(216): “la règle et l'événement, le concept et la singularité.”) that characterizes experience *qua* meaningful (i.e. repetitive) relationship to something *other* (i.e. singular). More generally, it characterizes the way that, as we said in chapter 2 with reference of “Archive Fever” (51(124f.). See above chapter 2, FN 64), anything One never maintains itself except in its vulnerability to singular others. Derrida writes: “As the condition of possibility and of impossibility, with all the paradoxes to which this last formula constrains us, iterability retains a value of generality that covers the totality of what one can call experience or the relation to something in general…” (“Afterword,” 129(234f.): “Condition de possibilité et d'impossibilité, avec tous les paradoxe auxquels nous contraint cette dernière formule l'itérabilité garde une valeur de généralité qui couvre la totalité de ce qu'on peut appeler l'expérience ou le rapport à quelque chose en général.”).

\(^50\) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 47(69); translation modified. In Spivak's standard translation “champ de l'étant” is translated as “field of the entity” instead of “field of being:” “The trace, where the relationship with the other is marked, articulates its possibility in the entire field of being, which metaphysics has defined as the being-present starting from the occulted movement of the trace.” (“La trace, où se marque le rapport à l'autre, articule sa possibilité sur tout le champ de l'étant, que la métaphysique a déterminé comme étant-présent à partir du mouvement occulté de la trace.”).
And this, again, not a mere limitation or not a limitation that can be overcome by epistemic means. It marks the quasi-transcendental condition for any relation to what we call the world, something that cannot be eliminated insofar as it describes the structure of any relation between same and other – including the relationship we have to ourselves. Thus, it is not that there is a world in itself and we ascribe the operation of différencé to it. Rather, différencé indicates the way that there is no world in itself (i.e. an exteriority understood as a stable meta-context for anything we experience as other) and that everything, while existing through certain repetitive structures, exists also, in this very repetition, in multiple and always also singular alterity relations. This is what makes any identificatory determinations – no matter how accurate and stable as measured by certain pragmatic outcomes – open to renegotiation and recontextualization.

Différance as the Necessity of Context

Maybe one of the most concrete ways that Derrida explains the universal operation of différencé and the trace is when he claims that every experience (and indeed everything) is framed by a context. This context makes the experienced thing available

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51 Derrida, “Afterword,” 136 (252), where Derrida notes that his (in)famous dictum that there is nothing outside the text means nothing more than that there is nothing outside context. He then he relates this to différencé as describing the structure of all reference. He writes: “The phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction (“there is nothing outside the text” [il n'y a pas de hors-texte]), means nothing else: there is nothing outside context.” (“La phrase qui, pour certains, est devenue une sorte de slogan en général si mal compris de la déconstruction ("il n'y a pas de hors texte") ne signifie rien d'autre: il n'y a pas de hors contexte.”). He then says that this does not exclude what is traditionally seen as the outside of language and ideality: “It does not suspend reference – to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other, since to say of history, of the world, of reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall that alterity (difference) is irreducible. Différance is a reference and vice versa.” (ibid., 137(253): “Il ne suspend pas la référence – à l'histoire, au monde, à la réalité, à l'être, surtout pas à l'autre puisque dire de l'histoire, du monde, de la réalité qu'ils apparaissent toujours dans une expérience, donc dans un mouvement d'interprétation qui les contextualise selon un réseau de différences et donc de renvoi à (de) l'autre, c'est bien rappeler que l'altérité (la différence) est irréductible. La différance est une référence et
to us as possessing a certain identity (intelligible based on certain repeatable categories), but it is also what makes it appear as inaccessible in its complex relational singularity, i.e. in all the singular ways it interacts with the world. This is why Derrida, as we already saw in chapter 3, refers to “différance as the relation (rapport) to an impossible presence.” And différance is this relation insofar as it marks “simultaneously” a movement of “coming back,” or of making sense of what we relate to outside of ourselves (for example through a context), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a movement involving “irreparable loss of presence,” that marks what we experience as existing outside and independently of us. Only when considering both of these aspects can we account for experience as both meaningful and non-solipsistic, or for my meaningful experience of something other.

It is through the notion of a context that we can understand our experiential relation to something other as both meaningful as well as always characterized by an absence in principle that indicates singularity and exteriority. For Derrida, a context is

réciproquement.”). Later on Derrida returns to the phrase nothing outside the text again and the need for interpretation and frames it again in terms of the differential trace: “What I call ‘text’ implies all the structures called ‘real,’ ‘economic,’ ‘historical,’ socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that ‘there is nothing outside the text.’ That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naive enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this ‘real’ except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring. That’s all.” (ibid., 148(273): “Ce que j’appelle ‘texte’ implique toutes les structures dites ‘réelles’, ‘économiques’, ‘historiques’, socio-institutionnelles, bref tous les référents possibles. Autre manière de rappeler une fois encore qu’il n’y a pas de hors-texte. Cela ne veut pas dire que tous les référents sont suspendus, niés ou enfermés dans un livre, comme on feint ou comme on a souvent la naïveté de le croire et de m’en accuser. Mais cela veut dire que tout référent, toute réalité a la structure d’une trace différencielle, et qu’on ne peut se rapporter à ce réel que dans une expérience interprétative. Celle-ci ne donne ou ne prend sens que dans un mouvement de renvoi différentiel. That’s all.”).

that which provides us with certain (implicit or explicit) rules, laws, norms and codes that allow us to understand something as a certain kind of thing and to experience or communicate it as possessing a certain meaning.\textsuperscript{53} And context should be understood very broadly here. It is not just discursive,\textsuperscript{54} but involves “the entire ‘real-history-of-the-world.’”\textsuperscript{55} – including conceivably what we call the natural environment.\textsuperscript{56} It designates anything in the world that allows us to make sense of something else.

The necessity of a context marks the experience of anything as a presence qua absence. This is insofar as the thing in its complex relational singularity must remain in principle irreducible to any context. This is because a thing can never be contextually grasped both in its totality (which would mean to grasp it through the totality of its possible contexts) and in its singularity (which is insofar as a context enables meaningful experience precisely in its generality). Singularity is the central term here. This is because the totality of contexts is an impossible notion for Derrida due to the fact that any

\textsuperscript{53} For the link between contexts and these general law-like structures see for example “Afterword,” (135f.(250)), where Derrida talks about the political implications of this necessity of context. He argues that neutrality is not possible in our determinations of the world and says that this “political dimension” (“dimension politique”) “depends upon codes that are still poorly apprehended.” (“relève parfois de codes encore mal reconnus.”). Examples for more explicit lawful structures would be “laws, constitutions, the declaration of the rights of man, grammar, or the penal code.” (134/243: “les lois, les constitutions, la déclaration des droits de l’homme, la grammaire ou le code penal.”). The context that determines our notion of objectivity for example is – although it is “extremely vast, old, powerfully established, stabilized” – is nevertheless “rooted in a network of conventions (for instance, those of language)...which still remains a context.” (136(251). See below FN 58).

\textsuperscript{54} Derrida, “Afterword,” 135(250): “This context is not only or always a discursive context.” (“Ce contexte n’est pas seulement ni toujours un contexte discursif.”).

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 136(252). See below FN 58.

\textsuperscript{56} Briggs, “Wild Thoughts,” 119: “Such a context may well include the environment, for the term context as Derrida uses it is not limited to a narrowly textual or discursive function. On the contrary, it ‘embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history and so on.’ And like contexts, ‘the’ environment, should here also be thought as multiple (ibid., 123).
context, insofar as it can be characterized through repeatable structures, ever so slightly shifts as it relates to another thing in its singularity.

Or, put differently, a context understood in isolation from that of which it is the context as well as from other contexts to which it could be related is always an abstraction. It is only through such an abstraction (which is always established and defended through a certain force\(^{57}\)) that we can understand a context as consisting merely of fixed and repeatable structures. It is only based on this abstraction that we can come to think that we (or rather, that an infinite intellect) could in principle understand one context alongside other contexts so as to yield a totality of possible contexts. However, in its operation a context is always affected by the singularity of what is other to it (i.e. either that of which it is the context or other contexts). This alterity allows any context to operate, but (as is the case with any One as we already saw in chapter 2) it is also what breaks with the repeatable structures that characterize it. What this means is that a totality of contexts is unattainable as a closed and stable meta-context. Insofar as contexts are always shifting in the face of singularity there is no one thing that such a meta-context would be. It would shift in ways that are both unpredictable and singular (i.e. that cannot be comprehended through general categories of meaning).

Thus, the absence characterizing the presence of that which is given through a certain context goes beyond the fact that any context is always specific, i.e., that it is tied to or exists in specific individual, social, spatio-temporal, material, conceptual and historical conditions (even though such conditions may be very broad and thus very hard

to discern as such conditions.\textsuperscript{58} To be sure, this is the case and it means that any context highlights one way a thing relates to us at the expense of other ways it could do so.\textsuperscript{59} For example, as both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have pointed out, the contexts of the natural sciences give us the world with very different meanings than the contexts structuring our everyday lives. However, this absence based on exclusive particularity or specificity would not describe an absence in principle. After all, it seems that we can think of these other contexts and these other ways of relating to a thing as in principle available to us (any natural scientist for example can also switch to an experience of the thing as given in the life world. A surgeon who experienced another’s body a moment ago as similar to a complex organic machine can later relate to the same body as the locus of a person).

\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., 136(251f.): “In short, I do not believe that any neutrality is possible in this area. What is called ‘objectivity,’ scientific for instance (in which I firmly believe, in a given situation), imposes itself only within a context which is extremely vast, old, powerfully established, stabilized or rooted in a network of conventions (for instance, those of language) and yet which still remains a context. And the emergence of the value of objectivity (and hence of so many others) also belongs to a context. We can call ‘context’ the entire ‘real-history-of-the-world,’ if you like, in which this value of objectivity and, even more broadly, that of truth (etc.) have taken on meaning and imposed themselves. That does not in the slightest discredit them. In the name of what, of which other ‘truth,’ moreover, would it? One of the definitions of what is called deconstruction would be the effort to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest and broadest attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualization.” (“Bref, je ne crois à aucune neutralité possible dans ce domaine. Ce qu'on appelle l’‘objectivité,’ par exemple scientifique (à laquelle je crois fermement dans une situation donnée) ne s'impose qu'à l'intérieur d'un contexte extrêmement large, ancien, puissamment installé, stabilisé ou enraciné dans un réseau de conventions (par exemple celles de la langue) qui reste néanmoins un contexte. Et l'émergence de la valeur d’objectivité (et donc de tant d'autres) appartient aussi à un contexte. On peut appeler ‘contexte’ toute l’‘histoire-réelle-du-monde,’ si vous voulez, dans laquelle cette valeur d’objectivité, et plus largement encore celle de vérité, ont pris sens et se sont imposées. Cela ne les discrédite en rien. Au nom de quoi, de quelle autre ‘vérité,’ d’ailleurs, les discréditerait-on? Une des définitions de ce qu'on appelle la déconstruction, ce serait la prise en compte de ce contexte sans bord, l'attention la plus vive et la plus large possible au contexte et donc un mouvement incessant de recontextualisation.”).

\textsuperscript{59}In a political context for example (and contextual determinations are always political for Derrida (ibid., 136(251)). See above FN 5\textsuperscript{8} any “[p]olitical evaluation…will always be formulated in a given context, starting from given forces or interests, against another manner of determining the context and of imposing this determination.” (ibid., 135(250): “L'évaluation politique…sera toujours formulée, dans un contexte donné, à partir de forces ou d'intérêts donnés, contre une autre manière de déterminer le contexte et en imposant cette détermination.”).
However, for Derrida these alternative contexts are not simply available to us, because no contexts (even those that constitute current experiences) are simply available to us. Thus, as we just indicated, even an infinite intellect could not be thought to grasp the totality of all possible contexts for a thing. This is because a context only operates in an open-ended interaction with that which it is the context of as well as with its own contexts. A context in its operation is never stable or fixed. It can only appear so through the deployment of further contexts, which, in turn, are always “differentiated and mobile” insofar as they always dynamically relate to what which we can abstractly determine to lie outside of them.

Thus, there is no meta-context that would allow us to understand a thing through a totality of contexts. The network of always singular differences that constitute anything that is part of a context as well as this context in its openness implies “an essential nontotalization.” Contexts ever so slightly shift over time and depending on what they relate to. What this means is that what we call a context is indeed an abstraction that is

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60 Ibid., 137(252). Derrida refers to a “given context” (“contexte donné”) as “always…differentiated and mobile” (“différencié et mobile, comme toujours”). See also ibid., 135(250), where Derrida talks about “the mobility of contexts that are constantly being reframed.” (“contextes mobiles et en constant recadrage”).

61 Ibid., 151(279f.): “The ties between words, concepts, and things, truth and reference, are not absolutely and purely guaranteed by some metacontextuality or metadiscursivity. However stabilized, complex, and overdetermined it may be, there is a context and one that is only relatively firm, neither absolutely solid [fermeté] nor entirely closed [fermeture], without being purely and simply identical to itself. In it there is a margin of play, of difference, an opening; in it there is what I have elsewhere called ‘supplementarity’ (Of Grammatology) or ‘parergonality’ (Truth in Painting).” (“Les liens entre les mots, les concepts et les choses, la vérité et la référence ne sont pas absolument et purement garantis par quelque méta-contextualité ou méta-discursivité. Si stabilisé, si complexe et surdéterminé qu’il soit, il y a un contexte et seulement un contexte relativement ferme, sans fermeté ni fermeture absolues, sans pure et simple identité à soi. Il y a en lui du jeu, de la différence, de l’ouverture; il y a en lui ce que j’ai appelé ailleurs de la ‘supplémentarité’ (De la grammatologie) ou de la ‘parergonalité’ (La vérité en peinture).”). See also “Force of Law,” 242(33).

abstracted both from that which it is the context of and from the other contexts we need in order to make sense of it. It designates that which we can make somewhat explicit as the specific (i.e. non-total), but general (i.e. repeatable) conditions of a particular meaningful experience.

To say that there is nothing outside of a context and that there is no meta-contextuality is thus to say that there is nothing given to us outside of a specific and dynamic set of meaning-enabling conditions that must lack any absolute grounding, and that thus cannot be understood completely. It is thus that the experienced thing in its full singularly relational complexity, or in all the ways it singularly relates to what we designate as exterior to it or to what we call the world, remains absent. And this would have to remain absent in principle even for an infinite intellect insofar as the mobility of

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63 “We must,” as Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology*, “begin wherever we are.” This is because “the thought of the trace…has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. Wherever we are: in a text [which, as we saw, we can also refer to as a context, T.B.] where we already believe ourselves to be.” (162(233): “Il faut commencer *quelque part où nous sommes* et la pensée de la trace, qui ne peut pas ne pas tenir compte du flair, nous a déjà enseigné qu’il était impossible de justifier absolument un point de départ. *Quelque part où nous sommes*: en un texte déjà où nous croyons être.”). This lack of an absolute foundation also becomes apparent in a passage from *Beast and Sovereign* where Derrida indicates that the validity of our divisions (between the valid and the invalid or the good and the bad) cannot separated from our existential, emotional and social relationships, our ‘interest’ to a thing or an issue. He writes: “The distinction between the good and the bad anachronism does not have its criteria outside what the reading-writing that busies itself with a given text, with more than one given text, does, succeeds or fails in doing. I cannot justify in all rigor, I cannot prove that I am right by any argument other than this, which is first of all a question or demand: do you find it interesting to listen to what I'm saying and then to read *Robinson Crusoe* differently?” (II, 87f.(137): “La distinction entre le bon et le mauvais anachronisme n'a pas ses critères en dehors de ce que fait, de ce que réussit ou échoue à faire la lecture-écriture qui s'affaire auprès d'un texte donné, de plus d'un texte donné. Je ne peux pas justifier en toute rigueur, je ne peux pas prouver que j'ai raison par un autre argument que celui-ci, qui est d'abord une question ou une demande : est-ce que cela vous paraît intéressant d'écouter ce que je dis et ensuite de lire autrement *Robinson Crusoé* ?”).
contexts (the way they are always shifting through time and characterized by difference) would prevent any absolute and fixed understanding of any context.\textsuperscript{64}

A context, then, enables experience, but it is not available as such because it would have to be understood through further contexts and in its singular mobile relations to other contexts and to that of which it is the context. Any context insofar as it is clearly intelligible and insofar as it allows for a clear understanding of something would always be a forced (and thus never merely theoretically grounded) determination of a context\textsuperscript{65} that is in fact dynamic and mobile.

Now, what corresponds to this mobility of each context and what drives it is that we can also think the relation between a context and that which it allows us to experience as a relation to something other. As we already indicated above, a context enables meaningful experience insofar as it designates the generally intelligible structures that allow us to understand a particular thing. However, such a thing, in its singularity, must always exceed the context in its generality (which is why contexts must be mobile and adaptable in order to function as contexts and why there is an “incessant movement of

\textsuperscript{64} Thus, on the one hand, we can never reduce this necessary contextuality by taking the contexts that allow us to experience a thing into consideration in the way they constitute this experience. This is because such an integration of context would require further contexts, and we would face the infinite regress we talked about above with regard to the relations that constitute a thing. However, on the other hand, and beyond this, a context in its operation and the way it is singularity open to what we designate as its outside, resists any understanding through a general context.

\textsuperscript{65} Derrida, “Afterword,” 136(251): “[T]here is always something political ‘in the very project of attempting to fix the contexts of utterances.’ This is inevitable; one cannot do anything, least of all speak, without determining (in a manner that is not only theoretical, but practical and performative) a context.” (“[T]here is always something political ‘dans le projet même de tenter de fixer le contexte des énoncés’. C'est inévitable, on ne peut rien faire, et surtout pas parler, sans déterminer (d'une manière qui n'est pas seulement théorique mais pratique et performative) un contexte.”). We will return to this practico-political nature of our experiential engagement with the world in chapter 6 when it is a question of talking about the possibility of social relationships with inanimate beings.
recontextualization”). In other words, this necessary excess of anything in its singularity over the general context that enables our experience of it is another way to express the fact that the very context that constitutes the experience of something is unavailable in this experience insofar as it singularly relates to that which it constitutes. It is this unavailability of the very singularity that also constitutes the experience of something (insofar as it is what allows a context in its generality to relate to the experienced thing in its singular alterity) that marks the experience of everything as involving a necessary interplay of presence and absence. What remains absent in principle for us is not just the thing in its complexity (insofar as a context is always specific as well as never quite self-identical), but also the thing in its singularity and its singular relationality. All there can be is thus an incessant movement of recontextualization and renegotiation without the telos of arriving at any definite context or a definite experience of the thing.

Thus, the principled inaccessibility that characterizes our experience of anything stems from the fact that a context enables experience and understanding insofar as its structure is general (i.e. insofar as it makes us understand something within a general framework of meaning), specific (i.e. insofar as it designates the way that something is related to us in our specificity, which allows us to understand something on certain general terms, but also excludes other ways of understanding the thing) and singularly dynamic (i.e. insofar as a context is never closed on itself, but is also able to precisely singularly relate (us) to a thing that it not itself part of this context).

66 Ibid., 136(252). See above FN 58.
While a context in its specific, but dynamic generality allows for the meaningful experience of something, it also makes this thing unavailable in its complex relational singularity, or in the singular ways it relates to what is external to it. Hence, any context that makes the experience of a thing possible as a particular kind of thing also marks the impossibility of capturing this experienced thing in its complex relational singularity. The multiple relations of a thing to what is external to it, might always invite an understanding through different general contexts, but no such context can capture these relations in their singularity, nor can it capture the singular interactions between the thing and the context through which it is understood.

It is because the thing is thus experienced as exceeding precisely the very context that also enables its experience, or because the thing is absent precisely against the backdrop of what makes it present, that this is again a presence qua absence. And it is due to the fact that anything, in its singularity, always exceeds the contexts we use to identify it that any identificatory determinations – no matter how accurate and stable as measured by certain pragmatic outcomes – are always open to renegotiation and recontextualization. As we already saw above, it is in this necessary recontextualization that we are always put into play as responsible beings (which is also why the assumption of or the insistence on any closed context is always irresponsible for Derrida\(^{67}\)).

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\(^{67}\)Ibid., 137f.(253f.): “This is why (a) the finiteness of a context is never secured or simple, there is an indefinite opening of every context, an essential nontotalization; (b) whatever there can be of force or of irreducible violence in the attempt ‘to fix the contexts of utterances,’ or of anything else, can always communicate, by virtue of the erasure just mentioned, with a certain ‘weakness,’ even with an essential nonviolence. It is in this relationship, which is difficult to think through, highly unstable and dangerous, that responsibilities jell, political responsibilities in particular. That will seem surprising or disagreeable only to those for whom things are always clear, easily decipherable, calculable and programmable: in a word, if one wanted to be polemical, to the irresponsible.” (“C’est pourquoi a) la finité d’un contexte n’est jamais assurée ni simple. Il y a une ouverture indéfinie de tout contexte, une non-totalisation essentielle; b)
will see below in chapter 6, it is also what indicates that any common world of meaning
(understood as a context of all possible contexts) is always constructed in a way that
destabilizes the distinction between possible and impossible contexts\textsuperscript{68} and that allows us
to construct a world shared even with inanimate beings.

Thus, our knowledge and our experience of things as well as people is never
conclusive – or it is always only conclusive for practical purposes, i.e., as we said above,
purposes that need to be tied back to the motivations that structure our individual and
social existence. What this means is that for both inanimate things and people ontological
difference yields epistemic fragility. And this is, again, not a mere limitation. Rather, this
structure of presence \textit{qua} absence is the only way we can understand the possibility of
experience as a meaningful relation to something other understood as a relation between
complex relational singularities. Thus, it can be discerned in anything we experience.

As far as the experiencing thing (or what, in the West, we today often call ‘the
subject’) is concerned, it means that we relate to the world and to anything in it only
through an excess over any general meaning-constituting categories we deploy. To be
sure, we cannot relate to the world \textit{only} as absolute alterity. We also need to draw on

\textsuperscript{68} This is also one way to understand Derrida’s frequent use of the term impossible. Nothing is absolutely
possible or impossible and thus everything is only possible or impossible within certain contexts. That
which is only possible \textit{qua} impossible is precisely the structure that describes the vulnerability of any
context (no matter how stable) that allows for the experience of what is possible and what is impossible as
well as a shift between the two.
general meaning-constituting structures such as, say, concepts or habitual perceptual patterns in order to experience. Nevertheless, it is an excess over such categories that first opens and maintains our relationship to the world qua alterity. Thus, nothing we experience is fully reducible to the presence enabled through our meaning-constituting categories.

As far as the thing experienced is concerned, the structure of presence *qua* absence means that anything we experience always exceeds the general identificatory categories we could deploy to understand it. We understand and identify a thing insofar as it lends itself to these kinds of categories. However, the thing in its singularity remains absent in principle. This also means (and we will return to this in chapter 6) that anything is only part of our world as also being outside of our world (even though it might not itself relate to its exterior as what we call a world). We might thus say that just as (as we said in chapter 3) we pass through the world (understood as general exteriority) without ever fully returning from it, anything in this world passes through *my* world (understood here as the space of possible meaningful experience) without ever fully remaining in or belonging to this world. Anything, in other words, is experienced as entering my world from somewhere outside of this, my world. We are thus, as Walter Scott puts it, “in open-ended worlds that are not ours.”69 It is this exteriority to my meaningful experience that is one way to understand the absence that marks alterity and to understand the possibility of experiencing something not merely reacting according to recognizable general patterns, but as acting in ways towards me that are never entirely predictable and that come from a

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place that I can in principle not directly experience. This is likewise something we will return to in chapter 6.

The Absence of My Singularity for Myself

What we can thus see here is that there is indeed a parallel between human and non-human and particular conscious, sentient and animate beings, on the one hand, and non-conscious, non-sentient and inanimate beings, on the other hand. This parallel consists in the fact that something remains inaccessible in principle in our experience of them. This is something we can understand as the inaccessible interiority of another insofar as that which remains absent belongs to a specific other.

What is important to point out about this kind of interiority, however, is that it is not one that is fully available even to the one to whom we assign it. We are not talking about an absence that corresponds to a full presence of self in the other. Indeed, one of the reasons that Derrida allows us to extend Husserlian Fremderfahrung (the empathic experience of another person) beyond conscious and living beings is that, unlike Husserl, Derrida does not think about that which is absent to us in our experience of another as possibly present elsewhere, namely in the experience of this other. In its reliance on the interplay between repeatability and singularity, Derrida's extension of what kinds of things are experienced through an absence that is irretrievable in principle (i.e. irretrievable even temporarily) corresponds to a critique of the self-presence of consciousness. This is insofar as it is this operation of différance that makes any experiential relation one of presence qua absence, including an experiential relation to self, a self which also remains absent in its complex relational singularity. For Derrida
presence is always already affected by absence. Thus Derrida writes in *Speech and Phenomenon*: “Once again, this relation to nonpresence neither befalls, surrounds, nor conceals the presence of the primordial impression; rather it makes possible its ever renewed upsurge and virginity. However, it radically destroys any possibility of a simple self-identity.”\(^{70}\) Thus, Derrida, unlike Husserl, cannot think the alterity of things as merely indicating the incompleteness of an entirety of aspects that can in principle be made present (though not necessarily at the same time). There is no pure originary givenness for Derrida, which means that what is absent for now can never be made simply present. Due to the operation of the trace, there is in anything a principled absence or hiddenness, an incapacity to go around to the other side to make it present. It is this alterity that first allows for self-consciousness as well as for the experience of other persons, because it is what opens anything to an outside. Another way to put this irreducible interplay of presence and absence is that for Derrida *any* experience – including the experience of myself – is a relation to another (and thus marked by the structure Husserl discerns in any *Fremderfahrung*), which is why Derrida at times talk about the other within me.\(^{71}\)

This means that we cannot simply reinstate the division between humans and non-human or between conscious and non-conscious beings with recourse to the notion of presence. We cannot reinstate it by assuming that in the case of the absence constitutive

\(^{70}\) Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 65f.(73): “Ce rapport à la non-présence, encore une fois, ne vient pas surprendre, entourer, voire dissimuler la présence de l'impression originaire, il en permet le surgissement et la virginité toujours renaissante. Mais il détruit radicalement toute possibilité d'identité à soi dans la simplicité.”

\(^{71}\) Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 68(87). See above chapter 2, FN 98.
of our experience of another person that which is in principle absent to us is possibly present to another. Rather, another's complex relational singularity, while constitutive of their consciousness, is absent to them too. Due to the necessary interplay of repetition and singularity, any experience of meaning always carries within it the non-meaning that comes from experience as a relation to something other or something that singularly exceeds my horizons of meaning. Of course, the general categories that another employs in their thinking are also absent to me in the sense that I do not know what another thinks if they do not tell me. However, this is an absence that can be alleviated through communication. What remains in principle absent in the singular relation of another to these general categories, which is something which also remains absent to another as well (and which this other's lived experience simply is qua operation of différance). This is insofar as we cannot conceive of general categories that would make intelligible the precise way that someone exceeds and is irreducible to the general intersubjective space of interaction that maintains and produces categories in their generality.

We can thus say that what matters for Derrida in the alterity of another is not the absence to me of something generally intelligible, or that there is another presence (for example in the form of consciousness). Rather, what matters is that I relate to an exteriority that presents itself to me only as a form of absence and that can only present itself as such an absence to anything exterior, something we linked above to the complex relational singularity of this other. It is thus a relation to someone or something who or that relates to the world in ways that cannot be reduced to my relation to the world – regardless of whether these alternative relations to the world are present to this other or
not. This absence of my own singularity to myself and indeed the irrelevance of self-presence to our experience of alterity will be important later in chapter 6 when we gauge how the account of alterity *qua* singularity and absence/presence presented here might help us to understand the possibility of empathic and social relationships to non-human (including inanimate) nature.
CHAPTER 5

THE EXPERIENCE OF A CORPSE AS LIVING DEAD

Before turning to the question of social relationships to inanimate beings in chapter 6, I want to provide a few textual indications that show that the account of our experience of inanimate beings provided here is not one forced on Derrida's text. Rather, Derrida gave several more explicit indications for an alternative relationship not just to animals but also to inanimate entities. After briefly looking at a few textual passages that suggest that Derrida remains open to the possibility of responsive and responsible relationships to inanimate beings, I will focus on Derrida’s last seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign* and specifically his discussion of our experience of the corpse in this text. I will end the chapter showing how what Derrida has to say about the corpse as an instance of living death is also extended to other presumably inanimate things, such as a book. This will later help us to understand the possibility of ethical and social relationships to inanimate beings more concretely on Derridean grounds. What will be particularly important in this chapter is the link between the experience of responsibility and responsivity, on the one hand, and the operation of a certain kind of fundamental imagination or belief (something Derrida refers to as a phantasm), on the other hand.

The fundamental role that this phantasm or the structure of an ‘as if’ plays in our relationship to the world will be crucial in order to understand the possibility of the constitution of a world shared not just with other humans or with other animals, but one
that can be thought to be shared even with inanimate beings and even with the earth. This question of a shared world is something we will return to in the concluding chapter 6.

**Textual Indications for a Different Conception of the Inanimate**

What I want to do in this section is to link what I developed above concerning responsible relationships to inanimate beings based on the experience of presence/absence to a few passages in Derrida's writing that show that this thought is not alien to Derrida's writing – although it is not extensively developed there beyond the question of animals.

We can begin to see that Derrida considers even our experience of inanimate things as characterized by an irreducible absence as early as “Violence and Metaphysics.” In this text Derrida (among other things) tracks certain problems he sees in early Levinas' conception of absolute alterity as well as Levinas' reading of Husserl and Heidegger. One of the disagreements between early Levinas and Derrida emerging here is that Derrida – against Levinas and with Husserl – affirms the notion of “an already irreducible alterity” of “[b]odies, transcendent and natural things.”

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1 Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 155(182): “Bodies, transcendent and natural things, are others in general for my consciousness. They are outside, and their transcendence is the sign of an already irreducible alterity.” (“Les corps, les choses transcendantes et naturelles sont des autres en général pour ma conscience. Ils sont dehors et leur transcendance est le signe d'une altérité déjà irréductible.”). Part of this irreducible alterity of things is that the horizon qua horizon that conditions any objectification, already for Husserl, cannot simply be made present (ibid., 150(177)). As such there can be no full grasp of any object: As we shift to one aspect of it others fade into a background horizon that is never simply available *qua* constituting horizon (similar to the way that, as we saw above, a context can never be understood in the way in operates without being fixed within other contexts). There is thus an “indefinite incompleteness of my original perceptions” (ibid., 155(183): “inachèvement indéfini de mes perceptions originaires.”). “[T]he concept of the horizon” thus “opens the work of objectification to infinity” (ibid., 150(177); “L'importance du concept d'horizon, c'est précisément…d'ouvrir à l'infini le travail de l'objectivation.”). This would be the alterity of “transcendence…of the inaccessible entirety.” (ibid., 155(183); translation modified:...
I suggest that we can only understand this disagreement between Levinas and Derrida if we take ‘irreducible alterity’ to signal an irreducible absence in our experience of another. When Derrida assigns alterity to non-human beings and even things, he is not just saying that I am not identical to these things or that a complete or total experiential grasp of them would be impossible. This is something Levinas could not deny. Nevertheless, for Levinas “things” do essentially not go beyond our sphere of experience or, in Derrida’s words, they “belong to the ego, to the ego’s economy (to the same).” They lack the “irreducible alterity” or interiority of human (or at least conscious, world-constituting) beings.

Against this view, and following Husserl, Derrida insists that things too exhibit alterity in “that something within them too is always hidden.” And although Derrida, at

“transcendence…du tout inaccessible.”).

2 In Totality and Infinity Levinas recognizes that “usage-objects, foods, the very world we inhabit are other in relation to us.” (38(28): “les objets usuels, les nourritures, le monde même que nous habitons, sont autres par rapport à nous.”). However, he adds that “the alterity of the I and the world inhabited is only formal” (ibid.: “l’altérité du moi et du monde habité n'est que formelle”). This is because “in a world in which I sojourn this alterity falls under my power” (ibid.: [c]elle tombe sous mes pouvoirs dans un monde où je séjourne.”).

3 Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 117(140). The phrase in context reads: “If one does not follow Levinas when he affirms that the things offered to work or to desire—in the Hegelian sense: for example, natural objectivity—belong to the ego, to the ego’s economy (to the same), and do not offer the absolute resistance reserved for the other (Others);…” (“Si l'on ne suit pas Levinas quand il affirme que les choses offertes au travail ou au désir — au sens hegelien (par exemple, l'objectivité naturelle) appartiennent au moi, à son économie (au même), ne lui offrent pas la résistance absolue réservée à l'autre (autrui).”).


5 In a similar vein Derrida talks about the “the possibility of the resistance of things” (“la possibilité de la résistance des choses”) and about the possibility of “rebelle against the notion of a purely intelligible resistance” (“si l'on est rebelle à la notion de résistance purement intelligible”) (ibid., “Violence and Metaphysics,” 117(140)).
least in this early essay, still gives indications that the alterity qua absent interiority that we find in another human being is not materially the same as that which we find in our experience of things,\(^6\) he nevertheless provides us with a basis on which to think the alterity of things as another kind of interiority by resisting the attempt to establish human alterity as the only ‘real and original’ alterity.\(^7\)

This would be an alterity that does not just consist in the impossibility of experiencing the thing in its entirety, but one that (and here Derrida and Husserl might part ways) consists in an absence of what can in principle not be fully recovered into a form of presence\(^8\) – something like a secret that (like all true secrets according to

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\(^6\) Again in “Violence and Metaphysics” Derrida insists that we should not confuse the alterity of other people with the alterity of other things (117(140)). Furthermore, he also seems to follow Husserl in a move that would somewhat alleviate the alterity of things and render doubtful the claim of alterity qua interiority in their case. He writes: “But in the case of the other as transcendent thing, the principled possibility of an originary and original presentation of the hidden visage is always open, in principle and a priori.” (ibid., 155(183): “Mais dans le cas de l'autre comme chose transcendantante, la possibilité de principe d'une présentation originaire et originale de la face cachée est toujours ouverte par principe et a priori.”). Indeed, it seems Derrida maintains a strong distinction between the alterity of human beings and the alterity of things, and precisely along the lines of interiority, i.e. “the radical impossibility of going around to see things from the other side” (ibid., 155(183): “…l'impossibilité radicale de faire le tour pour voir les choses de l'autre côté.”). Thus, what makes the other human other is a lack of access to an interiority, what makes other things other is a lack of access to an entirety. What remains hidden for things would be horizons, but horizons that can in principle be made present – although not \textit{qua} horizons. However, here it is important to remember Derrida's more critical engagements with Husserl and, in particular, his critique of the possibility of full presence in experience that we talked about above.

\(^7\) This is how Levinas seems to think about human alterity when he says that while animals might exhibit what he calls the face of the other, the human face comes first. In an interview Levinas says: “One cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal. It is via the face that one understands, for example, a dog. Yet the priority here is not found in the animal, but in the human face. We understand the animal, the face of an animal, in accordance with \textit{Dasein}. The phenomenon of the face is not in its purest form in the dog” (“Paradox of Morality,” 169). There is of course much to be said about to exactly interpret this notion of ‘priority.’ However, what is clear is that Derrida would be very skeptical about any talk of purity, and that, at least as far as alterity is concerned, he seems to take almost the opposite stance when he says that we cannot understand the human without understand that which is radically other (\textit{Beast and Sovereign}, 108(155). See above chapter 2, FN 4).

\(^8\) For a good account of Derrida’s account of ‘the thing’ and how Derrida “dethrones the ‘primacy’ of
Derrida\textsuperscript{9} is not presentable to us except as a limit in principle. This is because, as we said above, the operation of différance (for example understood through the irreducibility of context) turns everything experienced into the experience of a “presence-absence”\textsuperscript{10} that is never fully presentable.

Maybe one of the most important passages concerning a radically different and more social and responsive understanding of inanimate entities stems from a conversation between Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy that was held more than two decades after Derrida's early engagement with Levinas. We already referred to this passage in chapter 3 consciousness and overturns the claims it lays on the actual, present, real being” without returning to a certain pre-Kantian innocence of objectivity (xii) see Michael Marder's Event of the Thing.

\textsuperscript{9} See for example Derrida’s discussion of the secret in “Passions,” 23-31(56-71). This would be a secret that “is not phenomenalizable” (25(58): “n'est pas phenomenalisable.” See also 26(60)), but that makes possible any specific kind of secret (25f.(59f.)) and that indeed makes possible both any form of “consciousness,” (“conscience”) “subject” (“sujet”) or “Dasein” as well as any “being-with” (“l'être-avec”) or any “social link” (“‘lien social’”) (30f.(69f.)) – although it is not reducible to any of these aspects. It is that which links us to others, but at the same time it is the name for a kind of solitude. “Solitude, the other name of the secret” (30(69): “La solitude, l'autre nom du secret.”). In other words, it is the name of a kind of separation that turns every relation to another into an ‘as if’ (and we will return to this phantasmatic aspect below in chapter 6). At the same time, it is linked to a certain pathos, a being-affected or a passion: “There is no passion without secret, this very secret, indeed no secret without this passion.” (28(64): “Il n'y a pas de passion sans secret, ce secret-ci, mais pas de secret sans cette passion.”). Given these traits, it is not surprising that Derrida not only wonders whether this should not be called death (“given death” (“la mort donnée”) or “death received” (“la mort recue”)), but that he also (given the intimate link between life and death found in the trace that I discuss in this chapter) finally links the secret to life and the trace: “Shall we call this death? Death dealt? Death dealing? I see no reason not to call that life, existence, trace. And it is not the contrary.” (31(70): “Appellera-t-on cela la mort? La mort donnée? La mort reçue? Je ne vois aucune raison de ne pas appeler cela la vie, l'existence, la trace. Et ce n'est pas le contraire.”).

\textsuperscript{10} Derrida, Of Grammatology, 71(103f.). See above chapter 4, FN 34. See also Specters of Marx, 39(62), where Derrida says that the here and now in which we encounter a thing never simply translates into an immediacy of access to something simply given as “presence…. that is, substance, existence, essence, permanence.” (“présence, c'est-à-dire substance, existence, essence, permanence.”). “[T]he here-now does not fold back into immediacy, or into the reappropriable identity of the present, even less that of self-presence.” (“[L]'ici-maintenant, cela ne se replie ni dans l'immediateté, ni dans l'identité réappropriable du présent, encore moins celle de la présence à soi.”).
above in order to illustrate the operation of différance as an aporetic interplay between same and other, and repetition and singularity. However, the passage is equally important to understand how Derrida enables us a think a different relationship to non-humans (including inanimate beings). Derrida, in this interview, links the operation of the trace and of différance precisely to the notion of a certain non-sovereign proto-subjectivity even in inanimate things.

This proto-subjectivity, the kind of structure that underlies what we call subjectivity in humans, exhibits the same interplay of presence and absence, return and non-return, re-appropriation and expropriation that is constitutive of us as experiencing subjects. Derrida sums up this operation of différance as forcibly relating us to something other than ourselves (in the very movement of self-constitution) through the term ex-appropriation: “The ‘logic’ of the trace or of differance determines this reappropriation [i.e. the re-appropriation characteristic of the subject, T.B.] as an ex-appropriation. Re-appropriation necessarily produces the opposite of what it apparently aims for.”

As we already said in chapter 3, the movement of re-appropriation (e.g. the movement of our stabilized existence in the world) is “necessarily” ex-appropriation (i.e. a movement beyond what we can integrate into and as this existence). And because différance is not just the basis for the aporetic movement of human subjectivity, but also operates with regard to anything else that is, Derrida continues by saying that “[e]xappropriation is not what is proper to man. One can recognize its differential figures

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as soon as there is a relation to self in its most elementary form.”

Thus, importantly, exappropriation, the term that Derrida deploys to rethink what we call human subjectivity is a far less exclusive term than classical subjectivity. When Derrida is asked “When you decide not to limit a potential ‘subjectivity’ to man, why do you then limit yourself simply to the animal?,” Derrida – importantly without rejecting the characterization of exappropriation as “potential ‘subjectivity’” responds:

Nothing should be excluded. I said ‘animal’ for the sake of convenience and to use a reference that is as classical as it is dogmatic. The difference between ‘animal’ and ‘vegetal’ also remains problematic. Of course the relation to self in ex-appropriation is radically different (and that's why it requires a thinking of differance and not of opposition [where differance would take into consideration singularity and the fragility and permeability of boundaries and opposition would not[,] T.B.]) in the case of what one calls the 'nonliving,' the 'vegetal,' the 'animal,' 'man,' or 'God.' The question also comes back to the difference between the living and the nonliving.14

It is against the backdrop of this operation of ex-appropriation and of the

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12 Ibid.

13 Derrida relates the notion of play to differance, something that would be missing from opposition. This notion of play also designates differance as unintelligible through the framework of classical oppositions such as “activity and passivity,” “cause and effect,” “indetermination and determination” (Differance, 16(17)) or logical and empirical – something “which makes the thinking of it uneasy and uncomfortable” (“Différance,” 12(13): “ce qui en rend sans doute la pensée malaisée et le confort peu sûr”). Regarding the latter opposition, Derrida writes: “If there is a certain wandering in the tracing of differance, it no more follows the lines of philosophical-logical discourse than that of its symmetrical and integral inverse, empirical-logical discourse. The concept of play keeps itself beyond this opposition, announcing, on the eve of philosophy and beyond it, the unity of chance and necessity in calculations without end.” (ibid., 7(7): “S'il y a une certaine errance dans le tracé de la différance, elle ne suit pas plus la ligne du discours philosophico-logique que celle de son envers symétrique et solidaire, le discours empirico-logique. Le concept de jeu se tient au-delà de cette opposition, il annonce, à la veille et au-delà de la philosophie, l'unité du hasard et de la nécessité dans un calcul sans fin.”). In this play différance would put into question the structure of “simple symmetrical opposite(s).” (ibid., 10(10): “simple contraire(s) symétrique”). See also Derrida, “Afterword,” 156, FN 9 (243f., FN 1).

irreducible absence in another that follows from it that Derrida, a few years after this interview, in *Specters of Marx*, talks about the visor effect in terms of a thing seeing me without me being able to see it in turn.\(^\text{15}\) It is also why Derrida advocates a conception of ethics that begins not with humans or animals or the living, but with the monstrously other.\(^\text{16}\)

Much of this is phrased in terms of a ‘perhaps,’ not only because différance, as concerning precisely an excess over meaning, cannot give rise to a determinate and self-assured new ontology or ethics. It is also because Derrida knows he is operating from within a culture that in the conceptual structure that constitutes it emphatically excludes inanimate entities from the kind of absent interiority it assigns to what it calls subjects. Thus, any first steps in this direction can only be tentative. However, Derrida hints at another possibility, the possibility of another ethics and another community (that will always also have to be impossible in its fragility and vulnerability). This is a possibility of a more open and open-ended conception and ethics and community that would recognize our dependencies on, our interdependencies with, and our affectability by, so

15 In *Specters of Marx* Derrida writes (again in the context of the question of the dead, specifically of Hamlet’s father): “[T]his Thing that is not a thing, this thing that is invisible between its apparitions, when it reappears…meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity. It de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony. We will call this the *visor effect*: we do not see who looks at us.” (6(26): “Cette Chose qui n'est pas une chose, cette Chose invisible entre ses apparitions…nous regarde cependant et nous voit ne pas la voir même quand elle est là. Une dissymétrie spectrale interrompt ici toute spéculante. Elle désynchronise, elle nous rappelle à l'anachronie. Nous appellerons cela l’*effet de visière*: nous ne voyons pas qui nous regarde.”). See also “Archive Fever,” 41(98). In the context of the quote from *Specters of Marx* Marder talks about “the thing's self-animation, which no longer belongs to the order of knowledge” (*Event of the Thing*, 42).

much that is beyond what we call the human. It is a possibility that rests on the fragility of notions of the social, the political and the ethical that center exclusively around human beings (something that historically, and still today, only means certain human beings).

**The Experience of the Corpse in The Beast and the Sovereign**

In what follows, I want to flesh this out further with what is, to my knowledge, Derrida's most extensive discussion of an inanimate entity in the context of responsivity, responsibility and world. This is Derrida's discussion of our experience of a corpse in sessions 5 and 6 of the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*. This discussion and in particular Derrida's emphasis on the phantasm and the ‘as if’ will finally serve me as a basis for the concluding chapter 6 where I will outline the possibility of sharing a social world even with inanimate entities.

The double movement Derrida performs in these sessions of *The Beast and the Sovereign* is that he, on the one hand, thinks about [my imagined corporeal relationship to another after my death. On the other hand, he also thinks about my experience of

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17 Specifically, Derrida discusses the question of corpses here in the context of choosing the proper funeral rite. Although Derrida has talked about the question of death (See for example Aporias and Gift of Death) and the question of corpses elsewhere (See for example Demeure and The Death Penalty seminars), I will focus on these two seminars here as the question of the life of a particular inanimate entity emerges here with particular force. And although he talks about the issue earlier and later in the seminar Derrida’s discussion of our experience of a corpse is concentrated in sessions 5 and 6 of vol. II of *The Beast and the Sovereign*.

18 The relationship can only be imagined insofar as I cannot, by definition, experience anything after my death. However, as we will see, as Derrida generalizes this relationship to the survivor such that it already pertains while we are still alive, imagination (in addition to designating that which is merely imagined rather than perceived) does here also take on the meaning of that which relates to a certain deployment of the imagination and of phantasia, a deployment which does have no immediate bearing on whether that which is thus imagined is real or not. This question will return below as the question of the phantasm as positioned between reality and fiction.
another’s corpse. I begin by outlining some of Derrida’s thoughts on the former.

My Own Corpse

Derrida thinks about my corpse's relationship to those who survive me as a relationship of vulnerability to an other\(^\text{19}\) who, as survivor, sovereignly disposes of my remains. He then generalizes this vulnerable exposure to another to a general condition of living. Having my remains at the disposal of another “can also take place before I am…dead”\(^\text{20}\) And this would be a general definition of the other: The one before whom I am passively exposed.\(^\text{21}\)

In this definition of the other we can already see how it would extend beyond both human and animate entities. We could think of animals here (such as Derrida’s cat\(^\text{22}\)).

\(^{19}\) When I say ‘the other’ or ‘an other,’ the first thing that comes to mind is for most people a human person. However, the reason I do not specify “the other” in this way is that, as we will see, the other has an extension far beyond the human.

\(^{20}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 127(189): “But having my remains at their disposal can also take place before I am absolutely, clearly and distinctly dead, meaning that the other, the others, is what also might not wait for me to be dead to do it, to dispose of my remains: the other might bury me alive [literally or figuratively, Derrida adds during the session, T.B.], eat me or swallow me alive, burn me alive, etc. He or she can put me to a living death, and exercise thus his or her sovereignty.” (“Mais disposer de mes restes, cela peut se faire avant même que je sois absolument, clairement et distinctement mort, c'est-à-dire que l'autre, les autres, c'est ce qui peut aussi ne pas attendre que je sois mort pour le faire, pour disposer de mes restes: l'autre peut m'enterrer vif, me manger ou m'avaler vif, me brûler vif, etc. Il peut me mettre à mort vivant, et exercer ainsi sa souveraineté.”).

\(^{21}\) Ibid.: “The other appears to me as the other as such, qua he, she, or they who might survive me, survive my decease and then proceed as they wish, sovereignly, and sovereignly have at their disposal the future of my remains, if there are any. That's what is meant, has always been meant, by ‘other.’” (“L’autre m'apparaît comme autre en tant que tel, en tant que celui, celle ou ceux qui peuvent me survivre, survivre à mon décès et procéder alors comme ils l'entendent, souverainement, et souverainement disposer de l'avenir de mes restes, s'il y en a. Voilà ce que voudrait dire, ce qu'aurait toujours voulu dire ‘autre.’”).

\(^{22}\) See the first essay in Derrida’s *The Animal*, where Derrida talks about the (literally) naked exposure to the cat – and can we then really say his cat? – who is watching him and before whom he feels a certain embarrassment in his nudity. He writes: “I often ask myself, just to see, who I am – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment.” (3f.(18): “Souvent je me demande,
However, given Derrida’s repeated references to Robinson Crusoe’s fear of being swallowed or buried alive not just by humans or animals, but also by “the earth or the sea,” we may assume that the inanimate could also be such a surviving other. We can think here of the helpless awe one feels during or after disasters – whether categorized as ‘natural’ or as ‘human-made.’ This corresponds to the more general fact of our deep

moi, pour voir, qui je suis – et qui je suis au moment où, surpris nu, en silence, par le regard d’un animal, par exemple les yeux d’un chat, j’ai du mal, oui, du mal à surmonter une gêne.”)

23 The two major reference points for Derrida’s discussions in the second volume of The Beast and the Sovereign are Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe and Heidegger’s Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude.

24 Crusoe talks about “savages” and “wild beasts” or “creatures.” See Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 4/24f.

25 Ibid., 77(122f.): “You need to know or remember…that Robinson Crusoe's fundamental fear…is the fear of going to the bottom [au fond], precisely, of being ‘swallow'd up alive’…He is afraid of being swallowed up or ‘buried alive’…, thus of sinking alive to the bottom, of sinking and being dragged down to the depths, as much because of an earthquake as because of wild or savage beasts, or even because of human cannibals. He is afraid of dying a living death [mourir vivant] by being swallowed or devoured into the deep belly of the earth or the sea or some living creature, some living animal. That is the great phantasm, the fundamental phantasm or the phantasm of the fundamental: he can think only of being eaten and drunk by the other, he thinks of it as a threat but with such compulsion that one wonders if the threat is not also nurtured like a promise, and therefore a desire.” (“Il faut savoir ou se rappeler…que la peur fondamentale de Robinson Crusoé…c’est la peur d’aller au fond, justement, d’être ‘swallow’d up alive’…Il a peur d’être englouti vivant ou enterré vivant, donc de sombrer vivant au fond, d’y sombrer en se trouvant emporté au fond du fond, aussi bien par un tremblement de terre que par des bêtes féroces ou sauvages, voire par des cannibales humains. Il a peur de mourir vivant en étant avalé ou dévoré dans le ventre profond de la terre ou de la mer ou du vivant, de l’animal vivant. C’est là le grand phantasme, le phantasme fondamental ou le phantasme du fondamental: il ne pense qu’à être mangé et bu par l’autre, il y pense comme à une menace, mais avec une telle compulsion qu’on se demande si la menace n’est pas aussi caressée comme une promesse, et donc un désir.”).

26 This would of course differ in important ways from objectification by another human being or even by another animal. An example of how such feelings of awe and helplessness can express themselves in discerning a certain independent life in inanimate entities can be seen in Julie Cruikshank’s account of oral histories of certain peoples of what is now Alaska and Northwestern Canada (specifically Tlingit and Athapaskan peoples). These stories – and it is important to read this not as ‘mere stories,’ but as structures constitutive of certain forms of knowledge – portray glaciers as “conscious and responsive” and as, for example, being able to be “offended” by certain smells or behaviors (Do Glaciers Listen?, 8). This partly reflects the dangerous and shifting nature of these glaciers.
dependence on others in the broadest sense, i.e. on the literal and emotional nourishment we depend on in other humans, but also our dependency (physical, emotional, psychological) on other animals, on water, air, earth, and on the land in general as well as a particular place. I am dependent on these others and these contexts in order to live (for instance, for sustenance), but also in order not to die (for instance, not to be killed), and even in and beyond my death.

The Corpse of Another

As we already begin to see here, Derrida aims to problematize the purported

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27 To be sure, Derrida focuses mostly on human and animal, and generally living, others in this seminar as well as other texts of his. Nevertheless, there are passages where he considers the possibility of the land or the sea counting as others. Thus he writes: “But the earth and the sea are what is furthest from me and most different from me, most other; yet they are less others than the living beings, the wild beasts that threaten to devour me alive and that, closer to me, less different from me than the sea and the earth, those lifeless elements the sea and the earth, are nonetheless more other than the sea and the earth.” (Beast and Sovereign, II, 138f.(203): “Mais la terre et la mer sont ce qu'il y a de plus éloigné et de plus différent de moi, de plus autre ; elles sont cependant moins des autres que les vivants, les bêtes féroces qui menacent de me dévorer vivant et qui, plus proches de moi, moins différentes de moi que la mer et la terre, que les éléments sans vie que sont la mer et la terre, sont cependant plus des autres que la mer et la terre.”).

28 And this is not just a question of being embodied, but of how our body is never simply ours. Thus, Derrida says that we are never simply in possession of our own body. There is a sense in which it always belongs to an other. He writes: “I believe that this habeas corpus never existed and that its legal emergence, however important it may be, designates merely a way of taking into account or managing the effects of heteronomy and an irreducible non habeas corpus. And the non habeas corpse, at the moment of death, shows up the truth of this non habeas corpus during the lifetime of said corpus.” (Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 144(210): “[J]e crois que cet habeas corpus n'aura jamais existé et que son émergence légale, si importante qu'elle soit, ne désigne qu'une façon de prendre en compte ou de gérer les effets de l'hétéronomie et d'un non habeas corpus irréductible. Et le non habeas corpse, au moment de la mort, manifeste la vérité de ce non habeas corpus du vivant dudit corpus.”). Again, we can think here not just of the countless ways in which our body belongs to other humans – in birth, death and during our lives. We can also, in the words of environmental historian Linda Nash, think about the way that bodies are “intimately connected to their environments,” and how they are “permeable and porous” (Inescapable Ecologies, 7) to their environments in a way that problematizes the purported human sovereignty over nature. Thus, referring to the countless chemicals now found in human bodies due to the centuries of industrialization, Nash writes that “[a]s humans have industrialized the land, the land has, in turn, industrialized them. Neither the realm of nature nor the realm of the human remains pure.” (ibid., 218).
sovereignty of the living, and specifically its sovereignty over the non-living. And he pursues this problematization further as he supplements the imagined first-person perspective of a corpse (i.e. my post-mortem relationship to those who survived) with a survivor's actual first-person perspective on a corpse (i.e. my experience of the corpse of another) – a first-person perspective involving a second-person perspective coming from the corpse that erodes the strict separability of the living and the non-living.

The experience of the corpse of another is of interest to us both with regard to what it presents to us (we might provisionally say the content of this experience) and how it does so (we might provisionally say its form or mode). What it presents to us is “a

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29 And the non-living here includes both the dead (i.e. the inanimate which we think of as having once been alive) and the inanimate which presumably was never alive.

30 One instance where such an emerge of a second-person perspective, or a shift from ‘it’ to ‘you’, has been described by Derrida before is “Archive Fever” – although, there, it is a question of the dead in general, not of their corpse specifically. The text is concerned, among other things, with the ontological status of and our responsibilities towards ‘the archive’ – or rather the multiple kinds of archives we encounter and rely on every time some form of memory is stored in something considered external to the presumed origin of what is thus stored and preserved (but also, by the same token, made vulnerable to destruction). I just want to draw attention to a passage where Derrida talks about an excerpt from Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s book *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*. Specifically, Yerushalmi talks about a “Monologue with Freud” (“Archive Fever,” 20(42), passim) that he enacts with the deceased “father or…patriarch of psychoanalysis” (ibid.: “père ou…patriarche de la psychanalyse”). It is a “monologue” because only Yerushalmi is really speaking. He thus can only address himself to a “phantom” (“fantôme”), to “Freud’s ghost” or “specter” (“spectre”) (ibid., 29(63,65)). Derrida writes: “Freud is thus no longer treated as a witness in the third person (tertis), he finds himself called to witness as a second person.” And this talking to a phantom constitutes, as we will see below, “[a] gesture which is in principle incompatible with the norms of classical scientific discourse, in particular with those of history or of philology which had presided over the same book [i.e. Yerushalmi’s, T.B.] up to this point.” (ibid., 30(67): “Freud n’est donc plus traité comme un témoin à la troisième personne (tertis), il se trouve pris à témoin comme une deuxième personne. Geste en principe incompatible avec les normes du discours scientifique classique, en particulier avec celles de l’histoire ou de la philologie qui avaient, jusqu’à ce point, régné sur le même livre.”).

31 Derrida first introduces this difference between content and form or mode/modalit y in volume II of *Beast and Sovereign*. While the distinction at first might seem rather conventional, Derrida immediately begins to shift the conceptual terrain here by saying that the content of this representation has a kind of effective reality, even if we are talking about a memory, an anticipation or a phantasm. As we will see below, what
thing that...is at the same time [à la fois] a thing and something other than a thing?"32

And this lifeless thing that is not simply a thing would also not be simply lifeless. It possesses a certain alterity and not directly accessible interiority. It is thus not a thing merely given to us and at our disposal. Indeed, we begin to see here that this content is only given to us in the form of a certain removal. “[T]he dead body [cadavre] is something that is not simply an anonymous and lifeless thing [chose...sans vie],... [W]e only perceive it, we only have an experience of it, as the dead body of the other.”33

Derrida is interested in here is the way that certain experiential contents that we try to dismiss as to their reality by assigning certain experiential forms to them (such as memory, anticipation or phantasm) not only have a certain reality, but might in fact only be accessible in this reality at all in such experiential forms, i.e. forms that defy the ontological requirement of presence. This of course would also begin to put pressure on the distinction between form and content. Derrida writes: “[U]nless the difference between the conditional and the indicative, the difference between the conditional, the future, and the present or past indicative are merely temporal modalities, modalizations at the surface of conscious phenomenality or representation that count for little in view of the fantasmatic content that, for its part, happens, really did happen, to Robinson... As though the noematic nucleus of the phantasm, as it were (being buried or swallowed up alive), happened to him in any case, irreversibly happened, virtually but irreversibly happened, and the modes in which this noematic nucleus, its modalities or its modifications (present or future, indicative or conditional, perception or hallucination, reality or fiction) as modifications or secondary, relatively secondary, qualities, precisely, remain external and epiphenomenal.” (Beast and Sovereign, II, 128f.)(191): “...À moins que la différence entre le conditionnel et l'indicatif, la différence entre le conditionnel, le futur et le présent ou le passé de l'indicatif, ne soient que des modalités temporelles, des modalisations à la surface de la phénoménalité ou de la représentation conscientes et qui comptent peu au regard du contenu phantasmatique qui, lui, arrive, lui est effectivement arrivé, à Robinson;...Comme si le noyau noématique du fantasme, en quelque sorte (être enterré ou avalé vivant), de toute façon lui était arrivé, irréversiblement arrivé, virtuellement mais irréversiblement arrivé, et que les modes dans lesquels se présentent ce noyau noématique, ses modalités ou ses modifications (présent ou futur, indicatif ou conditionnel, perception ou hallucination, réalité ou fiction) restent, comme modifications ou qualités secondaires, relativement secondaires, justement, extérieures, épiphénoménales.”).

32 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 118(178); emphasis mine: “Qu'est-ce qu'une chose? Qu'est-ce que l'autre? Qu'est-ce que l'autre quand il s'agit de faire de moi, quoi? Quelque chose. Qu'est-ce que l'autre, quand de moi il s'emploie à faire une chose? Telle chose, par exemple une chose qui soit, tel un cadavre, à la fois une chose et autre chose qu'une chose?"

33 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 161(233): “Or le cadavre est quelque chose qui n’est pas simplement une chose anonyme et sans vie, et nous ne le percevons, nous n’en avons l'expérience que comme le cadavre de l'autre.” It is indeed almost impossible for us to see the corpse of a human being as merely a thing. We wonder, for instance, what the deceased would have wanted. We may even feel that whatever we
This experience of a corpse as the corpse of another, as a thing that is not simply lifeless goes in two directions, both of which are crucial as concerns the responsivity of and responsibility towards inanimate beings.

It is, first, “‘as if’ something could still happen [arriver] to the dead one, as if something could still happen that came to affect the body at the moment of cremation or burial, or even after, beyond that moment.” Second, it is “‘as if,’ ‘perhaps,’ something could still happen to the survivors on the part of the [de la part du] dead one, as cremated or buried body, or of what remains or does not remain of it…”

What this double feature assigned to a corpse – this ‘as if” it is still affected and still affects others – is analogous to (and this reflects the parallel between our experience of the animate and the inanimate we developed above), is the experience of a living other;

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Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 148(218); translation modified: “Whatever this choice be, it implies credit accorded to what, in an obscure way, I have proposed to call a phantasm, i.e. a certain ‘as if’ (an ‘as if’ in which one neither believes nor does not believe, in that dimension of Robinson Crusoe's ‘I do not know...’ that we analyzed last time), the ‘as if,’ the ‘perhaps’ of an ‘as if” something could still happen [arriver] to the dead one, as if something could still happen that came to affect the body at the moment of cremation or burial, or even after, beyond that moment; or again ‘as if,’ ‘perhaps,’ something could still happen to the survivors on the part of the [de la part du] dead one, as cremated or buried body, or of what remains or does not remain of it…” (“Quel que soit ce choix, il implique le crédit accordé à ce que, de façon obscure, j'ai proposé d'appeler un fantasme, à savoir un certain 'comme si' (un “comme si” auquel on ne croit ni ne croit pas, dans la dimension de ce ‘je ne sais pas...' de Robinson Crusoe que nous avions analysé la dernière fois), le ‘comme si,’ le ‘peut-être’ d'un ‘comme si’ il pouvait encore arriver quelque chose au mort, comme si il pouvait arriver quelque chose venant affecter le cadavre au moment de l'incinération ou de l'inhumation, voire après, au-delà de ce moment; ou encore ‘comme si,’ ‘peut-être,’ quelque chose pouvait encore arriver aux survivants de la part du mort, en tant que cadavre incinéré ou inhumé, ou de ce qui en reste ou n'en reste pas...’). The official translation renders “de la part du mort” as “on behalf of the dead.” While this is a correct translation, I chose “on the part of” (as in “coming from”) the dead in order to emphasize the non-(common-)sensical character of this fantasy. We might still easily imagine somebody speaking or acting on behalf of the dead. However, it is harder to imagine something happening to the survivors coming from the dead.
the living other as somebody who can be affected, can suffer, but also somebody who can affect others and make suffer in a way that is more than just causally attributable to this other or in a way that indicates a certain responsivity. This is one way to understand why Derrida talks about living death or the living dead (mort vivant) in this context. The dead body is not simply a lifeless thing.

But – assuming the posture of a certain common sense – we know of course that

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35 Indeed, for Derrida the ability to suffer and to be affected is one of the central features of the living. Thus, for example in The Animal Derrida talks about “the sharing of this suffering among the living.” (26(47): “partage de la souffrance entre des vivants.”). The ability (and necessity) to affect others as a hallmark of the living can be found in Derrida in a more indirect fashion, for example in the need to eat, to consume in the broad sense that Derrida gives to this term (see for example “Eating Well”), but also in the way the living can look at us and affect us in this way (see the gaze of his cat as described above in FN 22).

36 What I mean by a mere causal attribution is one that would involve suffering or being affected as it relates merely to certain causal relations such as the sadness we feel when looking at the corpse of a loved one or the way that a corpse can cause infections. This is in contrast to the attribution of certain acts that affect us to living beings. This attribution considers a being that affects us not just in its material and mental efficacy towards us, but considers it as affecting us based on its own structures of meaning (or at the very minimum a certain directedness that opposes itself to an outside). In other words, what Derrida has in mind here when talking about the way that we imagine the dead to ‘perhaps’ affect us, is a certain intentional affecting of ourselves or a responsive rather than a mere reactive affecting of ourselves.

37 This is for example the common sense Robinson Crusoe adheres to (something he shares for example with Freud and Marx (see below FN 76)): “[I]f Robinson Crusoe is in this way prey to these phantasms (being buried or swallowed alive, being afraid of the phantomatic trace of a footprint in the sand, etc.), he is nonetheless, as a realistic man and as an avowed Christian, someone who would like to situate himself firmly in good common sense, in stubborn denial of the spectral and the phantomatic” (Beast and Sovereign, 136(200): “[S]i Robinson Crusoë est ainsi la proie de ces fantasmes (être enterré ou avalé vivant, être apeuré par la trace fantomatique d’un pas sur le sable, etc.), c’est néanmoins, et comme homme réaliste et comme chrétien avoué, quelqu’un qui voudrait s’installer dans le bon sens et dans le sens commun, dans la dénégation têtue du spectral et du fantomatique.”). I want to suggest that this is the very common sense that makes Robinson Crusoe (along with his contemporaries and, I dare say, many people today) think of the indigenous people he encounters as “savages” (see above FN 24). And in line with this, I would also suggest that this is the very common sense that limits social, responsive and responsible relationships to human and (possibly) certain living beings. Thus, drawing on Elizabeth A. Povinelli’s essay “Do Rocks Listen?” Julie Cruikshank in her book Do glaciers listen? for instance, describes this common sense as a situation where “the very conditions of the Western material and cultural world are underpinned by language that rejects that possibility,” i.e. the possibility of “a country that listens” (4). See chapter 6, FN 97.
there is really no such thing: *In fact* – or so it seems if we shift what we could call the context of ‘objectivity’ – a corpse is entirely indifferent. It cannot actively affect others or be affected.

Our experience of a corpse as the corpse of another thus seems impossible. We might experience a corpse as ‘perhaps’ affected, as perhaps responsive or as affecting us in certain ways, but such an experience is *de facto*, which is to say *de jure* (or according

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38 Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 149(218); first emphasis mine): “…[T]his affection, this affect, this being-affected, everything seems [semble] to tell us – and this is the very sense that we simultaneously give to the word ‘death,’ and to the words ‘sense,’ ‘good sense,’ ‘reality,’ – everything seems to tell us, then, with an invincible authority, that this affection, this being-affected of the dead one or by the dead one is, precisely, interrupted, radically, irreversibly interrupted, annihilated, excluded by death, by the very sense of the word ‘death.’ And indeed just as much by the senses of the words ‘affect,’ ‘to affect,’ ‘to happen,’ etc.” (“…[C]ette affection, cet affect, cet être- affecté, tout *semble* nous dire, et c’est le sens même que simultanément nous accordons au mot ‘mort’, et aux mots ‘sens’, ‘bon sens’, ‘réalité’, tout semble nous dire, donc, avec une invincible autorité, que cette affection, cet être- affecté du mort ou par le mort est justement interrompu, radicalement, irréversiblement interrompu, anéanti, exclu par la mort, par le sens même du mot ‘mort’. Et d’ailleurs aussi bien par le sens des mots ‘affect’, ‘afectar’, ‘arriver’, etc.”). This relates to the fact that common sense assumes that a corpse lacks any future. It is not open towards the future in the way we are. It is only “as though” (“comme si”) the one who dies could “could count on a future” (“pouvait compter sur un avenir”) “just where death, according to common sense, would be removing all future from him or her” (“là où justement la mort, selon le sens commun, lui ôterait tout avenir.”) (ibid., 160(231)).

39 More precisely, it would not even be indifferent as this would presuppose a capacity to care or to be concerned about itself or the world. With Heidegger we could say it is merely “there” or “objectively present” (vorhanden) or possibly “instrumentally given” (zuhanden) and thus it is neither “indifferent” (“ungleichgültig”) nor “non-indifferent.” (“ungleichgültig”) (*Being and Time*, 40(42)).

40 This was part of Socrates’ point in the *Phaedo* where he, after being asked by Crito how he wants to be buried, indicates that the question is moot. He responds: “Any way you like,…if you can catch me and I do not escape you” (115c). Nevertheless, the question shows that Socrates’ attitude here is not a matter of course – even though we understand his point here rather easily. Indeed, there are other works of Plato where corpses figure prominently such as the *Laws* and the *Republic*. There are also other ancient works that center around our care of the corpse such as Sophocles’ *Antigone* or the *Iliad* where for example the corpses of Achilles’ friend Patroclus and Priam’s son Hector play a crucial role. (I owe most of these references to a paper Dennis Schmidt presented at the 2015 *Collegium Phaenomenologicum* (provisionally titled “Where ethics begins….”), a paper that he was generous enough to share with me and that hopefully will be published in some shape or form in the foreseeable future. The paper discusses the nature of ethical life, drawing in particular on volume 2 of *Beast and Sovereign* as well as “Rams.”).
to the normative structures that constitute a certain notion of reality or of the factual), purely imaginative. In line with this seemingly purely imaginative character of the experience, Derrida, “in an obscure way,”41 chooses to name and to categorize this mode of experience that makes something impossible present, but only present as absent with the term ‘phantasm.’43 And in framing this as an impossible experience or as the

41 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 148(218). See above FN 34.

42 The impossible here would refer to that which cannot be accommodated within a metaphysics or an ontology that works with a clear distinction between absence and presence and that sees reality and our access to it essentially in terms of that which is or can be made present. In such a metaphysics what is possible would be defined in terms of that which can, in principle, be made present. The impossible is thus that which we do not and cannot know to be possible or cannot make present as possible. The impossible for Derrida is relative to this metaphysics of presence and it functions to help us move towards a different sense of possibility, one that takes seriously the interdependence of presence and absence, of life and death and of possibility and impossibility. As Derrida writes in “A Certain Impossible Possibility,” “I'll be speaking about ‘saying,’ about ‘the event,’ and about ‘is’ but especially about ‘possible,’ which I will very quickly turn into ‘impossible.’ I'll say, I'll try to show in what way the impossibility, a certain impossibility of saying the event or a certain impossible possibility of saying the event, forces us to rethink not only what ‘saying’ or what ‘event’ means, but what possible means in the history of philosophy. To put it otherwise, I will try to explain how I understand the word ‘possible’ in this sentence in away that this ‘possible’ is not simply ‘different from’ or ‘the opposite of’ impossible, and why, in this case, ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ say the same thing.” (445(86): “Alors on reparlera de ‘dire,’ de ‘l'événement,’ de ‘est-ce que,’ mais surtout de ‘possible’ que je convertirai très vite en ‘impossible.’ Je dirai, j'essaierai de montrer tout à l'heure en quoi l'impossibilité, une certaine impossibilité de dire l'événement ou une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement, nous oblige à penser autrement, non seulement ce que veut dire ‘dire’, ce que veut dire ‘événement’, mais ce que veut dire possible en histoire de la philosophie. Autrement dit, j'essaierai d'expliquer pourquoi et comment j'entends le mot ‘possible’ dans cette phrase où ce ‘possible’ n'est pas simplement ‘différent de’ ou le ‘contraire de’ ‘impossible,’ pourquoi ici ‘possible’ et ‘impossible’ veulent dire le même.”).

43 Ultimately, Derrida indeed seems to suggest that every living death is only available as a phantasm and that every phantasm is only available as a form of living death, i.e. a form of presence in absence. This becomes apparent for example when Derrida talks about the way that the notion of the living dead seems to contradict the indubitable certainty that only the living can be affected or that something can happen only to the living. He writes: “It is precisely because this certainty is terrifying and literally intolerable, just as unthinkable, just as unpreventable and unrepresentable as the contradiction of the living dead, that what I call this obscure word ‘phantasm’ imposed itself upon me.” (Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 149(218): “C'est justement parce que cette certitude est terrifiante et littéralement insupportable, tout aussi impensable, tout aussi imprévisible, irreprésentable que la contradiction du mort-vivant, que ce que j'appelle du mot obscur de fantasme s'est imposé à moi.”). Importantly, Derrida seems to use the notion of the phantasm (fantasme) somewhat differently than in some his previous works – or at least he uses it for different ends. Derrida has often used the term “phantasm” to refer to something that is desired, but impossible. One example for such an impossible desire is Freud’s desire for certain knowledge.
experience of a presence that can only be thought as absent, we might already begin to
see that this notion of the phantasm traces the same structure of presence/absence we
were outlining in the previous chapter 4.

The Phantasm

We will return to the general significance of the phantasm below. For now, however, we have to ask whether this designation of our experience of the corpse as phantasmatic does not turn everything said so far into the most common-place observations. Does it not suggest that, while we are peculiar in our dealings with corpses and while there even might be reasons for this, none of these reasons can in fact be related to any care required or solicited directly by the corpse itself? It is true that by placing the experience of a corpse as living dead on the side of the fantasmatic, Derrida seems to place such living death in firm opposition to reality. However, what he actually does is to place it in opposition to a certain conception of

44 We might think here for example of issues relating to social cohesion or psychological health.

45 In other words, the care we show towards a dead body would in fact be directed towards ourselves and others who are still alive.
reality, one that thinks about reality in terms of presentification, of what is or can be
given now and what can thus, in principle, be known.46

Derrida writes: “But evidently, as dying a living death, in the present [au présent],
can never really [or: can never, in effect,47 T.B.] present itself [ne peut jamais se
présenter effectivement], as one cannot presently be dead, die, and see oneself die, die
alive, as one cannot be both dead and alive, dying a living death can only be a
fantasmatic virtuality, a fiction, if you like.”48

In other words, (living) death would be that which cannot be experienced at any
present moment as given. And if present givenness is an essential feature of reality, living
death can thus not be seen as real, but can only be categorized as virtual, fictional or
fantasmatic. However, given Derrida’s prolonged challenge to the metaphysics of
presence that we already partly rehearsed above, it should not come as a surprise that

46 This could be a presentification either of what exists mind-independently or of what is precisely
constituted by the subject as real in this presentification. In both cases, that which is would become
available to the development of a stable and fixed ontology.

47 Derrida frequently draws on the close relation between reality and effectivity here and elsewhere
(expressed in the German word for reality Wirklichkeit, which also contains the root to the word wirken,
meaning ‘to have an effect’), and he does so in particular in the context of the spectral, where it is a
question of disentangling a certain conception of reality from that which operates or has it effects in the
world. Thus, Derrida talks about “effective reality (wirkliche)” (54(134): “réalité effective (wirkliche)”) in
“Archive Fever,” where he furthermore writes: “This economy is no longer separated from questions of
‘effectivity,’ thus in quotations: is a phantom ‘real’ (wirklich) or not? But also of ‘truth.’ What about the
truth for Freud, faced with these specters? What, in his eyes, is the share, the allowance, the part of truth.”
(ibid., 55(135): “Cette économie ne se sépare plus des questions d’’effectivité’, donc, entre guillemets : est-
ce un fantôme ‘réel’ (wirklich) ou non ? Mais aussi de ‘vérité.’ Quoi de la vérité pour Freud, devant ces
spectres ? Quelle est à ses yeux la part de vérité?”).

48 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 130(192); translation modified: “Mais bien évidemment, comme mourir
vivant, au présent, ne peut jamais se présenter effectivement, comme on ne peut présument être mort,
mourir et se voir mourir, mourir vivant, comme on ne peut pas être à la fois mort et vivant, le mourir vivant
ne peut être qu’une virtualité fantasmaticque, une fiction, si vous voulez…”
Derrida does not see this irreducible deferral of presence as an epistemically and ontologically disqualifying condition that would render the phantasm empty (i.e. clearly not referring to anything non-mental).

Thus, after claiming that “dying a living death” is only available to us as a phantasm insofar as it can never really [effectivement] present itself, Derrida goes on to say that “this fictive or fantasmatic virtuality in no way diminishes the real all-powerfulness [toute-puissance effective] of what thus presents itself [se présente] to fantasy [i.e. which presents itself fantasmatically or in the manner of fantasy^49], an all-powerfulness that…rules over everything we call life and death, life death.”^50

This claim begins to make clear the aporetic nature of the phantasm of the living dead. After all, Derrida just dissociated the phantasm from what is really (effectivement) presenting itself (se présente), from what has the power^51 to do so, what can (peut) really present itself: The phantasm of “dying a living death…can never really present itself [ne

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^49 This presentation “to fantasy” [“au fantasme”] is here not to be understood as presentation to and through a faculty of fantasy or imagination, at least not a faculty that could be clearly distinguished from a presumed faculty of perception of cognition. Instead fantasme simply refers to the fantasmatic character of this experience (a fantasme that in the French also has connotations of being something desired). Thus, “what thus presents itself [se présente] to fantasy” (“ce qui ainsi se présente au fantasme”) should be read here not as that which presents itself to an independent faculty, but as the content (or noema) of this fantasme, a content which presents itself in the manner of a fantasme or a fantasy (that is to say presents itself as not really present).

^50 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 130(192): “[C]ette virtualité fictive ou fantasmatique ne diminue en rien la toute-puissance effective de ce qui ainsi se présente au fantasme, toute-puissance qui ne le quitte plus, ne le quitte jamais, et organise et commande le tout de ce qu'on appelle la vie et la mort, la vie la mort.”

^51 The French here is pouvoir, which is also the infinitive of the verb “can.” For the connection Derrida draws between the verb and the noun see for example Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 234(327) and 235(328): “Le pouvoir peut manquer.” (“Power can be lacking.”).
peut jamais se présenter effectivement]…”

Now, however, he speaks of the same phantasm (or rather its content\(^{52}\)) as that which is really all-powerful and which does in fact present itself – if only fantasmatically (“…the real all-powerfulness [toute-puissance effective] of what thus presents itself [se présente]…”).

What this means is that this phantasm of the living dead is not a mere product of the imagination. But this does not refer it back to reality either.\(^{53}\) Rather, the experience of a corpse unfolds only in an aporetic tension between the undeniable real presence (in perception) of a corpse as the corpse of another, on the one hand, and our knowledge that this presence ultimately refers but to an absolute absence, on the other hand. It is precisely in this tension that what Derrida calls the phantasm here unfolds, i.e. as the continued deferral of a presence that is both actually there, actually experienced, but also not actually there, i.e. denied by a knowledge that draws its criteria from a certain common sense that constitutes reality.\(^{54}\) In this sense, “[t]his power of all-powerfulness

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\(^{52}\) See above FN 31.

\(^{53}\) We could say that what Derrida is after here is a new sense of reality, but that would make things too easy. This is because the term ‘reality’ is itself part of the history of metaphysics of presence and it is very difficult to prevent the immediate association of the concept of reality with a certain notion of presence. It is, as we will see below, Derrida's notions of différance and of the trace that are supposed to begin to drive a wedge into this association.

\(^{54}\) Derrida says that he “does not know” that his “usage of the word ‘phantasm’ is congruent or compatible with any philosophical [or, he adds, psychoanalytic, T.B.] concept of the phantasma, of fantasy or fantastic imagination, any more than with the psychoanalytic concept of the phantasm, supposing, which I do not believe, that there is one, that there is only one, that is clear, univocal, localizable.” (Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 149(218): “Je ne sais pas si cet usage du mot fantasme est congruent ou compatible avec aucun concept philosophique du phantasme, de la fantaisie ou de l'imagination fantastique, non plus qu'avec un concept psychanalytique du fantasme, à supposer, ce que je ne crois pas, qu'il y en ait, qu'il n'y en ait qu'un, et qui soit clair, univoque, localisable.”). However, we may suspect that the reason Derrida
[puissance de la toute-puissance] belongs to a beyond of the opposition between being or not being, life and death, reality and fiction or fantasmatic virtuality.”55

The Power of the Phantasm

But how are we to understand this power of the phantasm? I suggest that the phantasm presents itself to us as powerful insofar as it constitutes a certain limit and unavailability to our presumed56 cognitive, epistemic, agential and deliberative powers – but a limit that also first enables said powers. Thus, it would be yet another way of framing the quasi-transcendental that we already talked about above under the names of the trace and différance and through the structure of presence qua absence.

We already said that the experience in question resists any clear placement on our part as either reality or fiction. This yields a kind of ontological uncertainty: We are unable to place this experience in any unequivocal way in the field of being. This corresponds to fundamental epistemic unavailability, one that would be a case of what we referred to above as epistemic fragility: The experience of the living dead is, according to

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55 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 130(192f.): “Cette puissance de la toute-puissance appartient à un au-delà de l’opposition entre être ou ne pas être, vie et mort, réalité et fiction ou virtualité fantasmatique.”

56 I say presumed powers here not just because (as we will see in a moment) these power or abilities can only be thought as also, at the same time, dis-abilities, i.e. because they can only be thought to enable experience as also planting a certain absence and lack of power at its heart. These ‘powers’ should also not be substantialized and thought of as faculties, but be understood functionally as mere abstract extrapolations of what they (dis-)enable us to do.
Derrida, only epistemically accessible to us in the mode of the ‘I don’t know,’ and thus, we might say, only accessible in a certain inaccessibility. The ‘as if’ something still could happen to the corpse or on the part of the corpse is “an ‘as if’ in which one neither believes nor does not believe, in that dimension of...‘I do not know ...’”\(^{57}\) If we would know that the phantasm refers us to a clear objective reality, Derrida argues, if we would know it to refer to some determinate and intelligible thing that exists separately, outside of ourselves, the phantasm would no longer be what it is, namely our mode of access to the spectral – a mode which can only exist in a certain uncertainty and unavailability. It would no longer be the experience of that which is neither simply there nor absent:

“Saying ‘I don't know’ about fantasy and revenants is the only way to take them into account in their very effective power [or their effective/real power itself: leur pouvoir effectif même, T.B.]…. If I said ‘I know,’ ‘I am sure and certain,’ clearly and distinctly, not only that I am affected by spectral fantasies, but that there really are such things outside of me, I would immediately dissolve spectrality, I would deny without delay, I would contradict a priori the very thing I am saying. I cannot say: ‘I am sure and I know’ that there is some specter there, without saying the contrary and without spiriting the specter away [conjurer le spectre]. ‘I don't know’ is thus the very modality of the experience of the spectral…”\(^{58}\)

\(^{57}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 148(218): “…un ‘comme si’ auquel on ne croit ni ne croit pas, dans la dimension de ce ‘je ne sais pas.’”

\(^{58}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 137(202): “Dire ‘je ne sais pas’ quant au fantasme et au revenant, c'est la seule façon de les prendre en compte dans leur pouvoir effectif même. Si je disais ‘je sais’, ‘je suis sûr et certain’, clairement et distinctement, non seulement que je suis affecté par des fantasmes spectraux, mais qu'il y en a réellement hors de moi, je ferais dissoudre immédiatement la spectralité, je dénierais sans
In other words, if the alterity of a corpse would be something I could simply know, the alterity in question would immediately dissolve into a form of presence, in which case we would no longer be dealing with the alterity of a corpse. And indeed, we would not be dealing with something strictly speaking other. As we saw above, what Husserl discerns as the structure of another consciousness is precisely this structure of impossible presence. If another would be present to me in the way I am presumably present to myself, this person would cease to be other. In this sense the in-between status of the phantasm, the way it is between absence and presence also gives us one way to describe the epistemic fragility that characterizes our relationship to another. This is why Derrida in “Archive Fever” describes “belief, the radical phenomenon of believing” as “the only relationship possible to the other as other.” And he does so precisely when talking about ghosts (fantômes).

This radical believing (understood through irreducible absence and lack of certainty), this epistemic fragility or this limit in principle to our epistemic powers (which

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59 This could be either the presence of the living (itself only a form of absence as we will see below) or the presence of a dead material body that would, in principle and over time, be accessible in all of its aspects.

60 “Archive Fever,” 59(147): “He [i.e. Freud. T.B] wants to explain and reduce the belief in ghosts. He wants to think through the grain of truth of this belief, but he believes that one cannot not believe in them and that one ought not to believe in them. Belief, the radical phenomenon of believing, the only relationship possible to the other as other, does not in the end have any possible place, any irreducible status in Freudian psychoanalysis.” (“Il veut expliquer et réduire la croyance au fantôme. Il veut penser la part de vérité de cette croyance, mais il croit qu'on ne peut pas ne pas y croire et qu'on doit ne pas y croire. Le croire, le phénomène radical de la croyance, seul rapport possible à l'autre en tant qu'autre, n'a finalement aucune place possible aucun statut irréductible dans la psychanalyse freudienne.”)
cannot be overcome because it is what constitutes these powers) also yields a principled limitation of our deliberative and agential powers in the experience of the phantasm. In particular, Derrida shows that the phantasm of living death underlying our choice of funeral rite (‘What would she have wanted?’) yields an aporetic structure that foils our capacity to deliberate and act on the proper funeral in a rational and unequivocal manner.\(^{61}\) No matter what I decide, there is always a way in which I betray the fantasmatically present/absent other: “[T]he more faithful I am the more I am unfaithful.”\(^{62}\)

Thus, the right choice with regard to another who is merely given to me as a corpse escapes me, as does knowledge regarding the fact or the mode of this other's existence. And this limitation of our power in and as the experience of the living dead does not just indicate the introduction of a certain powerlessness into the presumed

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\(^{61}\) Both of our calculations for the two kinds of funeral rite (i.e. burial or cremation) are always “inseparably and aporetically affected, contaminated, infected the one by the other” (“indissociablement, aporétiquement, l'un par l'autre affectés, contaminés, infectés l'un par l'autre,”). “[T]he economy of enjoyment [is, T.B.] rotten in advance, or more soberly let's say finite [or finished: finie, T.B.] and threatened, within itself, according to a terrible autoimmune logic, by the economy of suffering.” ([L]'économie de la jouissance d'avance pourrie, disons plus sobrement, finie et menacée, au-dedans d'elle-même, selon une terrible logique auto-immunitaire, par l'économie de la souffrance.”). (Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 146(213)). Whether I choose cremation or burial, in both cases I can come to think that I didn’t leave the other be in her alterity and merely projected onto her what I wanted, and in both cases I can be worried about cruelty, and about not giving the other the time and space that ought to be theirs. If I cremate the other (which I might do to prevent the other from slowly suffocating by ensuring her death, and to give the other a certainty of death and not bind her to a place), I might be worried about burning someone alive, about not giving the other enough time or about denying the other a place. If I bury the other (which I might do to not burn the other alive and to give the other some time and her own space) I might actually end up suffocating the other and fixing the other in place, a place where I can control the other (see ibid., 162-168(235-242)). One of the articles that discusses this aporetic structure in detail is Michael Naas' “Die a Living Death.”

\(^{62}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 170(244).
absolute power of the living over the dead. It also introduces a certain power into the presumed powerlessness of the dead vis-à-vis the living. In this way, it once more puts into question a certain common sense.  

The Constitutive All-Powerfulness of the Phantasm

But why designate this power of the phantasm as all-powerfulness? I suggest that there are two ways to understand this ‘all-.’ First, this phantasm is irreducible from or constitutive of our experience of the corpse. Second, the operation of the phantasm characterizes all experience. This is in line with what we already said about the phantasm as one version of the presence/absence that we discussed in chapter 4 as linked to the universal operation of the trace. I will first address the first point, and then discuss the second point when considering whether the human corpse can really be seen as representative in its phantasmatic presence/absence of inanimate in general.

The first way, then, to understand the ‘all-’ here and to understand the limitation of our powers marked in the phantasm as not being merely internal to the structure of the experiencing subject is that this limitation is constitutive of and thus ineliminable from our experience of the thing in question (namely the corpse). It is hence constitutive of this thing as that which we experience and irreducible from any way we can think this thing as being what it is. This is because it is only in this limitation of our powers of experience

63 Beast and Sovereign, II, 159f.(231): “I had taken a methodological precaution, in the order of the path to be followed. It had to do with the trivial axiom, but one that as they say bears the stamp of common sense, namely that the decision on this subject (inhumation rather than cremation) can only be the decision of one living and not of the dead.” (“J'avais pris une précaution méthodologique, dans l'ordre du chemin à suivre. Il s'agissait d'un axiome trivial, mais frappé comme on dit au coin du bon sens, à savoir que la décision à ce sujet (l'inhumation plutôt que l'incinération) ne peut être que la décision d'un vivant et non d'un mort.”).
and agency as well as in the absence and resistance of the thing which this limitation reflects that these presumed powers can get any purchase on the thing at all and make it present.  

What this means in the context of a corpse is that the aporetic and undecidable oscillation between absence and presence which the phantasm describes first opens our relationship to a corpse as corpse, to its meaning as an inanimate body that is always also animate qua body of another. The limiting power in question is thus neither simply negative (namely insofar as it enables experience) nor simply located in the experiencing subject (insofar as it is constitutive of what the experienced thing is – something we will return to below).

A corpse then is an example of a thing that is not simply a thing. It is an instance of something inanimate that we cannot simply experience as lifeless, as completely without the power – its own power – to affect (us) and be affected, and to resist appropriation. And this phantasmatic experience cannot be understood as merely a projection because its phantasmatic character is what first allows for the experience of a corpse as corpse – and it is also, as we will see below, what first allows for the experience of a living other insofar it allows for the experiencing of a body as something making present a certain absence.

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64 We are thus dealing with what has termed a quasi-transcendental structure of experience that disables the very thing it enables. See above chapter 3, FN 3.
Beyond the Corpse

Two Objections to the Environmental Relevance of the Corpse

But how is this relevant to thinking our relationship to inanimate natural entities other than as a relationship to mere things? While the experience of a human corpse might be a plausible instance of an inanimate body that is not simply lifeless, it also seems like a rather special case in at least two senses.

First, one might suspect that it is unique in that it is limited to the human (or possibly animal) embodied form. Second, it might seem derivative with regard to the living proper such that the spectrality of a corpse would be phenomenologically, psychologically and indeed conceptually dependent on the prior experience of life.65

Thus, this life of the dead – although irreducible and not simply located in the experiencing subject – would not be independently intelligible. It would be more like an

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65 Derida indeed seems admit a certain priority of the living, but only insofar as life would be the condition for experience (Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 149(218): “There is no affect without life, no event without life, there is neither affect nor event without sensibility, that power to be affected that is called life.” (“Il n'y a pas d'affect sans vie, pas d'événement sans vie, il n'y a ni affect ni évènement sans cette sensibilité, sans ce pouvoir d'être affecté qu'on appelle la vie.”)). However, this is in a context where he begins to outline how the experience of a corpse problematizes this common sense and where he hedges his claim by saying that this at least “seems” (“semble”) to be certain – although, admittedly it is ultimately not clear whether Derrida fully gives up this priority or whether he just extends and complicates the notion of life. Furthermore, the kind of priority of the living admitted here, i.e. a priority of life as that which first enables experience is a different kind of priority than a possible priority of the living over the dead within our field of experience. The former is an epistemic priority that corresponds to the logical necessity to presuppose life in order to think experience. The latter asks about something more akin to an ontological/phenomenological priority that would correspond to a necessary structure within our experience. Finally, even assuming Derrida (or we) would accept the epistemic/logical kind priority of life over death, we would have to consider the fact that the purity of life and its strict separability from death have been problematized by Derrida throughout his work (see for example “Passions,” 31(70). See above FN 9, or Speech and Phenomena, 102(115). See above chapter 3, FN 56). This is similar to the way that just because we can only experience other people based on our own experience, we would not deduce an absolute ontological priority of our own experience, but merely a relative epistemic one.
after-image necessarily retained from our experience of the living. This would not just entail a secondary ontological status for the life of the dead vis-à-vis the life of the living. It would also establish a firm limit between that which is dead (in the sense of having died or – at the very least – ended\textsuperscript{66}) and that which is merely inanimate (i.e. that which was never alive and thus could not produce the experience of living death\textsuperscript{67}). Thus, what Derrida says here about a corpse would have little pertinence for inanimate nature.

I will first address the latter question of derivativeness. I will then argue that the structure Derrida traces here is not limited to the human or the living. Instead, it is one way to understand the alterity that we established in the previous chapters to lie at the heart of experience and that enables it. Thus, the phantasm characterizes our relationship to the world and anything we discern within it.

Regarding the alleged privilege of the experience of the living body over the experience of a corpse, it is important to remember that the fundamental feature of the latter experience is that it is aporetic: the more faithful we think we are, the more we betray another and vice versa. This, in turn, reflects, for Derrida, the inevitability of a structure of mourning in our relation to a corpse, i.e. of an encounter with the absence of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{66} This is a Heideggerian distinction. Heidegger argues that only human beings (by virtue of having a relationship to their death as such) can die, while animals and the living in general just end or perish ("verenden") (see for example \textit{Being and Time}, 224(240f.), 229(247). See also \textit{Fundamental Concepts}, 267(388)). Derrida problematizes this distinction for example in \textit{Aporias} or in session four of \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, II.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{67} This is again a distinction for example Heidegger makes when he says in \textit{Fundamental Concepts} that "[a] stone cannot be dead because it is never alive." (179(265): "Ein Stein kann nicht tot sein, weil er nicht lebt.").}
another’s presence that we are presented with in a corpse.

Instead of seeing such aporetic mourning as derivative from the experience of the living, Derrida claims that the experience of the living dead points us to a structure already at work with regard to the living and which first makes the living available to us in experience. The faithful betrayal of mourning “does not wait for death.” Rather, “it is the very essence of the experience of the other as other,” i.e. of another in her “inaccessible alterity.” “One is always in mourning for the other.”

Not only is the phantasmatic experience of the living dead not just a retention-like remnant of our experience of the living (although its particular expression may be), but

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Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 168(242): “This same aporia, this same autoimmune double bind becomes paralyzed, or flaps around while becoming paralyzed, becomes clenched in the contradiction of an unfaithful fidelity, more unfaithful by increase of fidelity, more faithful by a hyperbole of infidelity, a contradiction that simultaneously structures and ruins all labor of mourning, and in truth all relation to others as labor of mourning. I say ‘relation to others as labor of mourning,’ for mourning does not wait for death, it is the very essence of the experience of the other as other, of the inaccessible alterity that one can only lose in loving it – or just as much in hating it. One is always in mourning for the other.” (“Cette même aporie, ce même double bind auto-immunitaire se paralyse ou s’agite en se paralysant, se tétanise dans la contradiction d’une fidélité-infidèle, plus infidèle par surenchère de fidélité, plus fidèle par hyperbole d’infidélité, une contradiction qui à la fois structure et ruine tout travail du deuil, en vérité tout rapport à autrui en tant que travail du deuil. Je dis ‘rapport à autrui en tant que travail du deuil’, car le deuil n’attend pas la mort, il est l'essence même de l'expérience de l'autre comme autre, d'une altérité inaccessible et qu’on ne peut que perdre en l'aimant – ou aussi bien en la haïssant. On est toujours endeuillé d'autrui”). This refers back to “Rams” – and I want to thank Dennis Schmidt for drawing my attention to this (see FN 40) – where Derrida talks about the “melancholic certainty” that one friend will always die before the other, and where it is again not just a question of our actual deaths. This is because this is a certainty that “begins, as always, in the friends’ lifetime [or with/coming from the very living of the friends: du vivant même des amis, T.B.].” And it begins during our lifetimes again as the very condition of our relation to the other. Derrida means to draw attention to what he calls here an “interruption,” an interruption that marks the possibility of accessing the other precisely as an impossible presence. Thus, he writes: “Far from signifying the failure of the dialogue, such an interruption could become the condition of comprehension and understanding.” (“Rams,” 139(21): “Loin de signifier l'échec du dialogue, telle interruption pouvait devenir la condition de la compréhension et de l'entente.”). And this interruption can be understood as a certain death that requires mourning, a mourning that is irreducible from our experience of the other.

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68 In other words, it matters what we knew about the person whose corpse we are now experiencing, but it does not matter that we knew the person in order for a certain experience of living death to occur.
it brings to the fore the operation of a structure that first allows for the experience of the living. This is insofar as another living being is always only available to us in its unavailability, only present as absent, or, as we said with reference to Husserl in the previous chapter, only accessible as inaccessible. If it were simply present, as we pointed out above with reference to Husserl, I would not experience another, but a part of myself. Furthermore, even the living other is only present as a material thing, but a thing that is not simply a thing and not simply material in the sense of pure immanence and givenness. In other words, even in our experience of living beings it is always only ‘as if’ they were alive such that our relationship to them is never simply one of knowledge or is, as we said above, one of epistemic fragility – which also means that

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70 This is something we described above with reference to Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*. See above chapter 4, page, FN 17.

71 As Derrida was well aware (see for example his engagement with Husserl in “Violence and Metaphysics”) and as we discussed in chapter 4, this is something Husserl has already pointed out in the 5th of his *Cartesian Meditations* with regard to another’s consciousness. See above chapter 4, FN 16. However, as we saw above, Derrida would go further than Husserl here insofar as Husserl talks only about the experience of another consciousness. He furthermore implicitly assumes at least the possibility (if not always the actuality) of the self-presence of my consciousness as opposed to the principled absence of another’s consciousness. Derrida’s critique of this self-presence of consciousness corresponds to an extension of what is absent in principle.

72 Regarding the material or corporeal character of the way we experience another conscious being and the way that this material body exhibits its own kind of alterity see for example “Violence and Metaphysics:” “But without the first alterity, the alterity of bodies (and the Other is also a body, from the beginning), the second alterity could never emerge. The system of these two alterities, the one inscribed in the other, must be thought together.” (155(183): “Mais sans la première altérité, celle des corps (et autrui est aussi d'entrée de jeu un corps), la deuxième ne pourrait surgir. Il faut penser d'ensemble le système de ces deux altérités, l'une dans l'autre inscrites.”). See also ibid. 117(140).

73 To be sure, this does not mean that the death of another should be trivialized or that the interruption always at work in any relationship between two living beings yields the same experience as the interruption we call death (proper). Indeed, the experiences are very different (although the existence of expressions “she’s dead to me” points to the way we do calculate with degrees of absence). However, both interruptions are instances of what is the fundamental condition of our relation to another's body as precisely the body of another and thus not fully reducible to myself and what I can experience and make intelligible. It is in this
every community has an element of violent imposition and appropriation. Thus, the experience of the living dead is not derivative from the experience of the living. Rather, it points to an operation that enables both the former and the latter, namely to the presence-absence of the trace that also makes our relationship to these others relationships of practical engagement and of force.

Beyond the Living and the Dead: The Simply Inanimate

But can this phantasmatic experience of alterity be generalized to include inanimate beings that do not have human embodied form? In my affirmative answer to the question I suggest that what Derrida refers to here as the all-powerfulness of the interruption that we can access a certain alterity and interiority in both the living other as well as the presumably inanimate corpse without being able to assign priority to either experience.

Derrida writes for example in “Archive Fever:” “By definition, because he is dead and thus incapable of responding, Freud can only acquiesce. He cannot refuse this community at once proposed and imposed. He can only say ‘yes’ to this covenant into which he must enter one more time. Because he will have had to enter it, already, seven or eight days after his birth. Mutatis mutandis, this is the situation of absolute dissymmetry and heteronomy in which a son finds himself on being circumcised after the seventh day and on being made to enter into a covenant at a moment when it is out of the question that he respond, sign, or countersign. Here again, the archive marked once in his body, Freud hears himself recalled to the indestructible covenant which this extraordinary performatif engages: ‘I shall say ‘we’, when it is addressed to a phantom or a newborn. (Let us note this at least in parentheses: the violence of this communal dissymmetry remains at once extraordinary and, precisely, most common. It is the origin of the common, happening each time we address ourselves to someone, each time we call them while supposing, that is to say while imposing a ‘we’, and thus while inscribing the other person in this situation of an at once spectral and patriarchic nursling.).’” (30(67f.): “Par définition, puisqu’il est mort et donc incapable de répondre, Freud ne peut qu’acquiescer. Il ne peut pas refuser cette communauté à la fois proposée et imposée. Il ne peut que dire ‘oui’ à cette alliance dans laquelle il doit entrer une autre fois. Car il aura dû y entrer, déjà, sept ou huit jours après sa naissance. Mutatis mutandis, c’est la situation de dissymétrie et d’hétéronomie absolue dans laquelle se trouve un fils qu’on circoncit après le septième jour et qu’on fait entrer dans l’alliance à un moment où il est hors de question qu’il réponde, signe ou contresigne. Ici encore, l’archive une fois marquée dans son corps, Freud s’entend rappeler l’alliance indestructible qu’engage cet extraordinaire performatif : ‘I shall say ‘we ’’, quand il s’adresse à un fantôme ou à un nouveau-né. (Notons-le au moins entre parenthèses : la violence de cette dissymétrie communautaire reste à la fois extraordinaire et, précisément, fort commune. Origine du commun : elle advient chaque fois que nous nous adressons à quelqu’un, que nous l’appelons en supposant, c’est-à-dire en imposant un ‘nous’, et donc en inscrivant ainsi l’autre dans cette situation de nourrisson spectral et patriarchique à la fois.

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phantasm of the living dead does not just lie in the fact that it is constitutive of and thus ineliminable from our experience of a corpse and of a living being. Rather, this phantasm is all-powerful also because it points to an operation at work in our relation to anything. It is in fact one way to experience and describe the violent/non-violent vulnerability or weakness that characterizes us as open to another and as experiencing.75 Its operation exemplifies a fundamental structure of our very existence as experiencing, i.e. auto-hetero-affective, beings. Indeed, it is only through the deferral of any presence (a deferral described in the notion and experience of life death) that we can think experience and thus self or world.

We already saw this above when we established the universal extension of différance and the trace as marking our relationship to anything in the world as one of presence qua absence. The phantasm refers to one of the ways we can experience this absence or how it is given as an uncertain spectrality, i.e. present as absent. Against the backdrop of our desire to know and the necessity to experience the world through certain meaning-constituting and presentifying structures, the phantasm refers to the experience

75 In “Archive Fever” Derrida talks about the dead Freud's inaccessibility as his “all-powerful vulnerability” (29(64): “toute-puissante vulnérabilité”). This vulnerability, in turn, can be related to the weakness or non-violence that is to be found in our also always violent relationships to others (see “Archive Fever,” 137f.(253f.). See above chapter 4, FN 67). The vulnerability of the dead towards another, just like the weakness of the living vis-à-vis another (see above FN 74), marks the fact that we are always open towards appropriating and appropriation by another. In this sense, this vulnerability is all-powerful, just like the phantasm, which, qua phantasm, is always fragile. This “all-powerful vulnerability” that characterizes the all-powerful operation of the phantasm can be seen as the counter-force or -power to what Derrida, in “Invention of the Other” (40/54) refers to as the “assimilatory power that neutralizes novelty as much as chance” (“puissance assimilatrice qui neutralise la nouveauté autant que le hasard”) of “homogeneity itself” (“l'homogénéité même”).
of the constitutive fragility of this knowledge – a fragility that derives from the singular alterity that marks our relationship to the world as the first exteriority in general. The phantasm, in other words, is another way to describe the epistemic fragility that characterizes our relationship to the outside world. It designates that which is always uncertain in our relationship to the outside or the other, or the fact that our relationship to the world is not exclusively and not first and foremost one of knowledge, but one of an engagement with singular alteritites.

If the spectral cannot be reduced, it is because it is an aspect of the structure of experience as presence qua absence. If it cannot be known, it is because knowledge is always contextual and reliant on repeatable structures while the spectral marks the singular beyond of any such context. It marks the way that any context is never quite conclusive and thus – to the extent that it takes itself to be definitive – is always phantasmatic. It is thus that Derrida says that the knowing subject par excellence, the scholar as such, who has dedicated herself to the ideal of knowledge and ‘objectivity,’ never believes in phantoms and believes in the strict distinction between the living and the non-living.76

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76 Specters of Marx, 12(33): “There is no longer, there has never been a scholar capable of speaking of anything and everything while addressing himself to everyone and anyone, and especially to ghosts. There has never been a scholar who really, and as scholar, deals with ghosts. A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being (‘to be or not to be,’ in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. Beyond this opposition, there is, for the scholar, only the hypothesis of a school of thought, theatrical fiction, literature, and speculation.” (“Il n'y a plus, il n'y a jamais eu de scholar capable de parler de tout en s'adressant à n'importe qui, et surtout aux fantômes. Il n'y a jamais eu de scholar qui ait vraiment, en tant que tel, affaire au fantôme. Un scholar traditionnel ne croit pas aux fantômes – ni à tout ce qu'on pourrait appeler l'espace virtuel de la spectralité. Il n'y a jamais eu de scholar qui, en tant que tel, ne croie à la distinction tranchante entre le réel et le non-réal, l'effectif et le non-effectif, le vivant et le non-vivant, l'être et le non-être (to be or not to be, selon la lecture conventionnelle), à l'opposition entre ce qui est présent et
However, the phantasm and the spectral cannot be known precisely because they mark the quasi-transcendental conditions of what we call knowledge. They are what marks the relation to alterity (including the alterity of what we call the world) that first allows for experience and that thus first allows for something to be there to be known. And this knowledge can only appear as certain and stable (for example to the objective ‘scholar’) based on certain contexts that are always fixed or determined through a certain violent reduction of the singularity of what is other and the spectrality that this carries with it.

Thus our knowledge that there really are no phantasms, no ghosts, that a corpse is clearly dead, or that one clearly cannot talk with a rock because it is inanimate, is itself always constituted by a radical phantasmatic belief. In other words, the context that allows for such ‘knowledge’ is always without an absolute grounding and is thus perpetually haunted by what it excludes as spectral or unreal – such as the inaccessible absence that marks our experience of all others, including non-human and inanimate others.

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ce qui ne l'est pas, par exemple sous la forme de l'objectivité. Au-delà de cette opposition, il n'y a pour le scholar qu'hypothèse d'école, fiction théâtrale, littérature et spéculation.”). And this would be precisely the objectivity that, as Derrida points out in the “Afterword,” (136(251f.). See above chapter 4, FN 58), is also always dependent on a specific, i.e. non-absolute context, and that thus is haunted by what it excludes.

It is furthermore this spectrality, this modality of the ‘I don’t know,’ that so many thinkers try to exclude and reduce in favor of a philosophy of knowledge or presence. Both Marx and Freud are examples for Derrida of thinkers who, even though they were not unaware of this element of spectrality, tried to conjure away, to ban specters in their opposition to knowledge. Thus, Derrida writes about Marx: “Marx will always have had in common with his adversaries. He too will have tried to conjure (away) the ghosts, and everything that was neither life nor death, namely, the re-apparition of an apparition that will never be either the appearing or the disappeared, the phenomenon or its contrary.” (Specters of Marx, 58(83f.): “Marx aura toujours eu en commun avec ses adversaires. Il aura aussi voulu conjurer les fantômes, et tout ce qui n'était ni la vie ni la mort, à savoir la ré-apparition d'une apparition qui jamais ne sera ni l'apparaître ni le disparu, ni le phénomène ni son contraire.”). For Freud see “Archive Fever,” 59(147). See above FN 60.

77 See Harvey, Animism, 37 and 87 on the distinction between talking to and talking with.
The conjuring of the spectral, that Derrida for example discerns in Marx's and Freud's encounters with the spectral,\textsuperscript{78} would be the desire to relate to the world in purely theoretical terms and in the mode of knowledge. This, however, can only be done by suppressing both the experience of responsibility and of epistemic fragility that characterizes our relation to the world.

The Parallel Between Trace and Phantasm

Thus, what underlies the \textit{all}-powerfulness of the phantasm of living death is the fact that everything that is is only given to us through the “presence-absence” of the trace. This is what enables both our experience of living others, but also of another's corpse as still somehow alive – and indeed of the deceased (person) as still somehow alive.\textsuperscript{79} We can always continue to relate to another in their absence.

The experience of the living dead is precisely an instance of the appearance of the trace as the disturbance of the familiarity of reality and common sense (that it also enables).\textsuperscript{80} The experience of the corpse is an experience of living death and presence-absence not so much because the corpse is another body, but because it affects us as another, i.e. in a way that we cannot simply integrate into what we understand. We are affected by the corpse as if it were alive, but we are affected in this way precisely against

\textsuperscript{78} See above FN 76.

\textsuperscript{79} While the corpse and the deceased are not quite the same, the life of dead that we experience in a corpse can also be framed as the experience of the corpse \textit{as} the experience of the deceased in a kind presence/absence. The latter would be rooted in the same operation of différance that allows for the presence/absence of a living person through and as their lived body.

\textsuperscript{80} Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, 70f.(103). See above chapter 4, FN 38.
the backdrop of a common sense that can only negate this experience. It is thus that this experience can only be the experience of a perhaps and it is thus that this is the experience of the trace as that which conditions and exceeds any form of definite meaning. Derrida thus writes:

Under the sign of this ‘as if,’ ‘perhaps,’ ‘I do not know,’ [all modalities of the phantasm of the living dead, T.B.] we allow ourselves [and this ‘allowing’ does not indicate sovereign power here, but an involvement that, as we saw in part I, constitutes responsibility, T.B.] to have an impression made on us, we allow ourselves to be affected, for this is an affect, a feeling, a tonality of pathos, we allow ourselves really to be affected [nous nous laissons effectivement afferter] by a possibility of the impossible, by a possibility excluded by sense, excluded by common sense [le sens commun], by the senses [les sens] and by good sense [le bon sens], excluded by what is often called the reality of the reality principle."

It is because of this structure of possibility/impossibility that Derrida refers to the absence-presence, to the spectral dis-appearance, designated by the phantasm as a “modality…of the surviving trace in general.” And insofar as the surviving trace is precisely what marks our relationship to what is other, the phantasm would be that which names our meaningful relationship to anything insofar as it is a relationship to what is other and thus always open to re-negotiation and always affected in ways that might exceed what we understand as possible based on our current determinations of the

81 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 149(217f.): “Sous le signe de ce ‘comme si’, ‘peut-être’, ‘je ne sais pas’, nous nous laissons impressionner, nous nous laissons affecter, car c'est un affect, un sentiment, une tonalité de pathos, nous nous laissons effectivement afferter par une possibilité de l'impossible, par une possibilité exclue par le sens, exclue par le sens commun, par les sens et par le bon sens, exclue par ce qu'on appelle souvent la réalité du principe de réalité.”

82 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 137(202). See above FN 58.

83 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 47(69). See above chapter 4, FN 50.
world.

The Book as Another Instance of the Living Dead

This is why Derrida does not limit the experience of living death to the human corpse. It is with reference to the surviving trace and to alterity that Derrida also talks about books – and indeed any kind of archive in the broadest sense – as a form of living death. He writes “As is indeed any trace, in the sense I give this word and concept, a book is living dead, buried alive and swallowed up alive.” More specifically, Derrida – right after talking about the “power of all-powerfulness” of the life death that phantasmatically presents itself to us (i.e. presents itself as present qua absent) – talks about books as also existing in the “weave (tissage) of survival, like death in life or life in

84 And what Derrida says here about a book a form of the trace would distinguish it from his use of the term ‘book’ in Of Grammatology, when he refers to the book as indicating a striving for closure and totality. He writes: “The good writing has therefore always been comprehended. Comprehended as that which had to be comprehended: within a nature or a natural law, created or not, but first thought within an eternal presence. Comprehended, therefore, within a totality, and enveloped in a volume or a book. The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier;…The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing… If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book, as it is now under way in all domains, denudes the surface of the text” (18(30f.): “La bonne écriture a donc toujours été comprise. Comprise comme cela même qui devait être compris: à l'intérieur d'une nature ou d'une loi naturelle, créée ou non, mais d'abord pensée dans une présence éternelle. Comprise, donc, à l'intérieur d'une totalité et enveloppée dans un volume ou un livre. L'idée du livre, c'est l'idée d'une totalité, finie ou infinie, du signifiant;…L'idée du livre, qui renvoie toujours à une totalité naturelle, est profondément étrangère au sens de l'écriture…Si nous distinguons le texte du livre, nous dirons que la destruction du livre, telle qu'elle s'annonce aujourd'hui dans tous les domaines, dénude la surface du texte.”). Thus, Derrida refers to Hegel as “the last philosopher of the book” (but also, given Hegel’s emphasis on difference, as “the first thinker of writing” (ibid., 26(41): “dernier philosophe du livre et premier penseur de l'écriture.”)). Derrida's reference to the book in Beast and Sovereign is best understood through the notion of writing and of text that Derrida opposes to this term (“book’) in Of Grammatology.

85 Beast and Sovereign, II, 130(192f.); translation modified. See above FN 55.

86 Beast and Sovereign, II, 130(193): “As is indeed any trace, in the sense I give this word and concept, a book is living dead, buried alive and swallowed up alive.” (“Comme d'ailleurs toute trace, au sens que je donne à ce mot et à ce concept, un livre est un mort vivant, enterré vivant et englouti vivant.”).
death” “from which the tissue of living experience [or existence,] T.B.] is woven, through and through.”

Importantly, this weave or tissue of survival that, at first, seems to weave together life and death must be understood as actually preceding these determinations: “[T]he survivance I am speaking of is something other than life death, but a groundless ground from which are detached, identified, and opposed what we think we can identify under the name of death or dying (Tod, Sterben), like death properly so-called as opposed to some life properly so-called. It [ça] begins with survival.”

One way to understand the way that what Derrida names survivance here should be thought as preceding life and death is that both life and death must be understood as

87 The French says existence. However, it is not quite clear here which version to trust as sometimes corrections have been made in the English translation based on Derrida’s original transcripts that differ from the published French version of the seminar.

88 Beast and Sovereign, 132(195): “This survivance is broached from the moment of the first trace that is supposed to engender the writing of a book. From the first breath, this archive as survivance is at work. But once again, this is the case not only for books, or for writing, or for the archive in the current sense, but for everything from which the tissue of living experience is woven, through and through. A weave of survival, like death in life or life in death, a weave that does not come along to clothe a more originary existence, a life or a body or a soul that would be supposed to exist naked under this clothing. For, on the contrary, they are taken, surprised in advance, comprehended, clothed, they live and die, they live to death as the very inextricability of this weave.” (“Cette survivance est entamée dès la première trace qui est supposée engendrer l'écriture d'un livre. Dès le premier souffle, cette archive comme survivance est à l'œuvre. Mais encore une fois, cela ne vaut pas seulement pour les livres ou pour l'écriture ou l'archive au sens courant, mais pour tout ce dont est tissé, de part en part, le tissu de l'existence vivante. Tissage de survie, comme mort dans la vie ou vie dans la mort, tissage qui ne vient pas revêtir une existence plus originaire, une vie ou un corps ou une âme qui existeraient, nus, sous ce vêtement. Car, au contraire, ils sont pris, d'avance surpris, compris, habillés, ils vivent et meurent, ils vivent à mort comme l'indémêlable même de ce tissage.”).

89 Beast and Sovereign, 131(194): “[L]a survivance dont je parle, c'est autre chose que la vie la mort, mais un fond sans fond à partir duquel se découpent, s'identifient, s'opposent ce qu'on croit pouvoir identifier sous le nom de mort ou du mourir (Tod, Sterben), comme la mort proprement dite par opposition à quelque vie proprement dite. Ça commence par la survie.”
deeply relational and as marking the irreducibility of the trace as the opening towards another.\textsuperscript{90} Life as a constant dependence on and vulnerability to another (for example in the form of death: mine or that of another living being); death as another kind of vulnerability to another and as one form of alterity in relation to which life defines itself and through (i.e. against and based on) which it persists.

Survivance can thus be understood as the operation of the trace or différance and as describing our vulnerability to another. This would be the other understood as exteriority\textsuperscript{91} that persists beyond me, a there (là) beyond my life that structurally always survives me. This is how we can make sense of what Derrida writes right after saying that "it" begins with survival: “And that is where there is some other that has me at its disposal; that is where any self is defenseless. That is what the self is, that is what I am, what the I is, whether I am there or not. The other, the others, that is the very thing that survives me, that is called to survive me and that I call the other inasmuch as it is called, in advance, to survive me, structurally my survivor. Not my survivor, but the survivor of me, the there beyond my life.”\textsuperscript{92} And survival should here be understood not just temporally, but also as that which lives beyond me, beyond my reach, which would also

\textsuperscript{90} Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, 47(69). See above chapter 4, FN 50.

\textsuperscript{91} Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, 70f.(103). See above chapter 4, FN 38.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, 131(194): “Et c'est là qu'il y a de l'autre qui dispose de moi, c'est là que tout moi est sans défense. Voilà ce qu'est le moi, voilà ce que je suis, ce que le je est, que je sois là ou pas. L'autre, les autres, c'est cela même qui me survit, qui est appelé à me survivre et que j'appelle l'autre en tant qu'il est appelé, d'avance, à me survivre, structurellement mon survivant. Non pas mon survivant, mais le survivant de moi, le là au-delà de ma vie.”
be what accounts for the condition of mourning that characterizes our relationships to both the living and the dead.

What is very important to understand here is that survivance as a weave of relations between life and death, absence and presence and as the condition for what we call life and death marks life as a relation. This is not just in the sense that life, as a biological or psychological phenomenon, would depend on relationships to something external (for example in the form of a metabolism), but that life should not be thought as a fixed substance, but as existing as a multitude of dynamic relations. This is why Derrida can talk about the animation of a book as coming with the reading of it.\textsuperscript{93} And importantly, like in the case of the corpse, the book's life should here not be seen as derivative from the life of the reader. This is insofar as a book is also what animates a reader. Thus, Derrida talks not just about “the reanimating reading” (“la lecture réanimante”) of a book (\textit{genitivus objectivus}) but also “the experience reanimated, reawakened in the very reading”\textsuperscript{94} of a book (\textit{genitivus subjectivus}).

\textsuperscript{93} In fact, Derrida refers to Husserl here: “Like every trace, a book, the survivance of a book, from its first moment on, is a living-dead machine, sur-viving, the body of a thing buried in a library, a bookstore, in cellars, urns, drowned ill the worldwide waves of a Web, etc., but a dead thing that resuscitates each time a breath of living reading, each time the breath of the other or the other breath, each time an intentionality intends it and makes it live again by animating it, like, as the Husserl of the \textit{Origin of Geometry} would say, a ‘geistige Leiblichkeit,’ a body, a spiritual corporeality, a body proper (\textit{Leib} and not \textit{Körper}), a body proper animated, activated, traversed, shot through with intentional spirituality.” (\textit{Beast and Sovereign}, II, 131(194): “Comme toute trace, un livre, la survivance d'un livre, dès son premier instant, c'est une machine morte-vivante, sur-vivante, le corps d'une chose enterrée dans une bibliothèque, une librairie, dans des caveaux, des urnes, noyée dans les vagues mondiales d'un \textit{Web}, etc., mais une chose morte qui ressuscite chaque fois qu'un souffle de lecture vivante, chaque fois que le souffle de l'autre ou l'autre souffle, chaque fois qu'une intentionnalité la vise et la fait revivre en l'animan, telle, dirait le Husserl de \textit{L'Origine de la géométrie}, une ‘geistige Leiblichkeit,’ un corps, une corporalité spirituelle, un corps propre (\textit{Leib} et non \textit{Körper}), un corps propre animé, activé, traversé, transi de spiritualité intentionnelle.”).

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, II, 132(195): “[O]ne can and must, one must be able, in the wake, the inheritance,
It is based on this close connection between the trace as the opening towards another (and thus the opening of experience), life and the spectral appearance of life death that we can understand why Derrida in *Specters of Marx* talks about learning to live as learning to experience\(^95\) and indeed as learning to live and interact with ghosts or phantoms (fantômes).\(^96\) It is this tissue of survivance that accounts for the phantasmatic relations between life and death that also allows for the experience of the corpse as living dead. It is what is presupposed by any treatment of the corpse as corpse of another.\(^97\)

Given that Derrida – in line with the close connection between the trace and

\(^{95}\) *Specters of Marx*, xvif.(14). See above chapter 2, FN 49.

\(^{96}\) *Specters of Marx*, xviiif.(15f.): “So it would be necessary to learn spirits. Even and especially if this, the spectral, is not. Even and especially if this, which is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, is never present as such. The time of the ‘learning to live,’ a time without tutelary present, would amount to this, to which the exordium is leading us: to learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly But with them.” (“Il faudrait alors apprendre les esprits. Même et surtout si cela, ni substance ni essence ni existence, n’est jamais présent comme tel. Le temps de l’apprendre à vivre’, un temps sans présent tuteur, reviendrait à ceci, l’exorde nous y entraîne: apprendre à vivre avec les fantômes, dans l’entretien, la compagnie ou le compagnonnage, dans le commerce sans commerce des fantômes. À vivre autrement, et mieux. Non pas mieux, plus justement. Mais avec eux.”).

\(^{97}\) Thus, Derrida writes about “the perspective of religions or philosophies or ideologies” on the corpse that they “all presuppose, far from making it merely possible, this universal structure of survivance that I have just mentioned” (*Beast and Sovereign*, II, 132(195): “dans l’horizon des religions ou des philosophies ou des idéologies qui toutes supposent, loin de la rendre seulement possible, cette structure universelle de la survivance que je viens d’évoquer.”).
survivance – talks about “the universal structure of survivance,” there is – despite the still suspiciously human character of a book – no reason to suppose that this mutually animating experience of a “there” beyond my own life, a there that survives me through a certain life of its own, cannot be applied to natural inanimate entities as well.

It is this question of life in co-called inanimate beings that I want to address further, although somewhat obliquely, in the concluding chapter 5 by assessing the possibility of social and communal relationships with inanimate beings. This will again return us to the question of life and death (which is crucial for Derrida for the possibility of any kind of community) as well as to the question of the trace or of absence qua presence. I suggest that what we already saw with the corpse is not just a relationship to something not simply dead, but also a relationship that can be characterized as social. I suggest furthermore that Derrida can account for such relationships to inanimate natural beings based on the the singular bonds that link us to what is external to us, including to what he at some point refers to as our habitat. It is these relations as well as the pragmatic character of what we imagine to be the world that would also allow for the construction of a community of a shared world with inanimate beings.

98 Ibid.
CHAPTER 6
THE POSSIBILITY OF SHARING A WORLD WITH INANIMATE NATURE

As I briefly indicated at the end of chapter 5, what is crucial for our purpose of conceiving of an alternative conception of and relation to inanimate beings is that Derrida portrays our relationship to the corpse not as one between a subject and an inert object. Rather, this is a relationship characterized by responsiveness on both sides and of responsibility on our side. It is also characterized by an irreducible need for action in the absence of conclusive knowledge while still considering certain norms (‘I do not know, but I wonder what this other would reasonably have wanted?’).

Indeed, I suggest that Derrida portrays the relationships between the survivors and the corpse as a social relationship. This is not just in the sense that the question of what to do with a corpse seems to be of essential importance to any community of living human beings. Rather, the relationship to the corpse and the deceased are not relationships that can be guided by strict and conclusive forms of practical and theoretical rationality that merely reflect the will and interests of the living.

These relationships are open to change and re-consideration, and open to change

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1 Reasonableness is one criteria that drives Derrida's prolonged discussion of the proper funeral rite in The Beast and the Sovereign (see chapter 5, FN 61). Although this question seems to ultimately not allow for a rational solution (in that we end up with the aporetic structure of betrayal by faithfulness that we discussed in the previous chapter), we arrive at this aporia by going through different reasons for why burial or cremation might be better or worse.
precisely coming from the corpse in its alterity – similar to the way that a book has a way to shape our relationship to and conception of it. The corpse itself is experienced as affecting, shifting and indeed threatening, but also potentially supporting, the kinds of theoretical and practical norms and reasons that guide our relationship to it. This does not necessarily mean that we have to assume that the corpse itself has reasons or acts based on its own form of rationality in the way we do. It does mean, however, that it affects the kinds of practical and theoretical rationality that mediate our relationship to it from a place that cannot be fully accommodated within these forms of rationality. This is one way to understand Derrida's discussion of the impossible decision regarding the proper funeral right. On the one hand, a corpse solicits us to deliberate on how we should relate to and act towards this corpse given what we know about the deceased and about certain fears and hopes we imagine we share (such as the fear of being buried or burned alive). In this sense, a corpse solicits both the deployment of certain forms of rationality as well as an adaptation of these forms to the specific circumstances of the dead. At the same time, the fact that we always ultimately arrive at a dead end in our careful and conscientious deliberation indicates that that which solicits the deployment and adaptation of certain forms of rationality cannot ultimately be accommodated within these forms. It thus affects these forms from a certain beyond, something we will theorize below as, perhaps or maybe,² the beyond of another world. It is through its solicitation of

² And this perhaps (peut-être) is, as might already have become somewhat clear in the previous chapters, a technical term for Derrida that indicates that we do not relate to others in their singularity and as potential loci of alternative worlds in the mode of conclusive knowledge.
both the deployment and adjustment of forms of theoretical and practical rationality\(^3\) from a locus beyond these forms that a corpse can be seen as a participant in the constitution of a kind of social normativity rather than merely its object. This would be one way to understand our relationship to it as social. We will further flesh this out below as the possibility of seeing even inanimate beings as both sharing a world with us as well as existing in their own world(s).

It is through this simultaneous sharing and not-sharing of a world that we can furthermore understand a corpse as responsive. In its singularity it eludes our capacity to simply predict the way it will act towards us in terms of a simple reaction. At the same time, we can, to some extent, make sense of the corpse as not just a thing (even if this sense might be phantasmatic) and thus see some of its responses precisely as not just chaotic, but as meaningful responses. We relate to the corpse in the mode of an ‘as if’ through which we experience a corpse as having certain generally intelligible tendencies, fears, desires and interests.

To be sure, it is of course possible to experience a corpse as nothing more than a thing. However, importantly, such an experience must be understood as phantasmatic as well. This is first indicated by the fact that this experience is always unstable. It is unstable due to our vulnerability towards certain ways of being affected by the corpse as not just a thing. More importantly, any rejection of such affects as phantasmatic based on

\(^3\) Any form of rationality that guides our relationship to a corpse would thus not simply be ours, but one that is also the corpse’s in the sense that it is organized also around the corpses existence.
a certain common sense would depend on a specific context in order to exclude the validity of any social experience of the corpse. However, because no such context can be absolutely justified, this knowledge (and thus this exclusion) would not be conclusive. It thus can be characterized as a kind of phantasm as well insofar as it consists in a framework of meaning that helps us to make sense of the world, but that it also belied by certain experiences of the world.

We thus see, once more, the all-powerfulness of the phantasm as lying in its irreducibility. And, as we said in the previous chapter, this all-powerfulness can also be understood as the fact that our relationship to anything is phantasmatic. This is insofar as anything, in its singularity, exceeds the general meanings we assign to it. It is thus that, as we said above, this ‘as if’ of the phantasm is not to be understood as derivative. Rather than indicating our experience of a corpse as being a kind of secondary after-image of our relationship to living humans or animals, it is what structures our experience to any living being and indeed to anything exterior to us (or, as we often say without much thought, anything in the world). This is insofar as it is precisely what describes the epistemic fragility that characterizes our relationship to anything other, anything exterior as only present *qua* absent (see chapter 3) or as affecting us in ways that always demands a certain determination, but that, at the same time, can never be completely assimilated to our meaning-constituting categories.

It is this structure of singular excess over any general understanding that makes any conception of a corpse as merely an object unstable and dependent on a certain force
trough which certain affects and ways we relate to a corpse (for example in a social manner) are suppressed. In this sense, a social relationship to a corpse (as a thing that is responsive, that evokes responsibility, and that shares certain meanings with us) might be phantasmatic, but so is any outlook that merely sees a corpse as an object – and it would be precisely the corpse we experience as disturbing this relation to it as a pure object. Thus, we cannot dismiss the social character of our relationships to a corpse merely based on the phantasmatic character of these relationships.

What I want to suggest in this concluding chapter is that a similar argument can be made for inanimate non-human beings. What will be central here is Derrida's notion of a community of the world that is both constructed (i.e. that lacks an absolute foundation) and fractured (i.e. that is exceeded by each member of such a community in a way that indicates that they live in their own world). I will first focus on the notion of singularity again and briefly revisit two passages that indicate that Derrida was open to the possibility of certain bonds to earth others, bonds we might characterize as quasi-social. These bonds would precisely have to be understood as singular, and thus exceeding any specific community.

I suggest that this excess that emerges precisely as a bond is one way to extend the simultaneous sharing and not sharing of a world, which Derrida discerns among living beings, to so-called inanimate beings. I show how Derrida's notion of co-habitation and habitat might provide an entry point into understanding the sharing/not-sharing of a world.

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4 The term is borrowed from Val Plumwood. See above chapter 4, FN 6.
with what we call inanimate beings. I finally consider the objection that we cannot share a world with non-living beings because they do not possess a world that we could share in. I end with a very brief reference to animism as designating ways of life that can illustrate what it would mean to share a world with what we consider inanimate beings, i.e. share a world with these beings that they also exceed insofar as they are not experienced as mere objects, but as persons.

**The Question of the Earth**

I now return to two quotes involving the earth that we already cited in chapter 1. However, they might appear in a new light now given both what we already said in the previous chapters about singularity as well as our current question concerning the possibility of social relationships with inanimate beings. The first quote merely indicates that the problem of how we relate to the earth and how we live with the earth as humans (or how what we make of the human earth) was something Derrida considered an important issue. Thus, as we mentioned above, Derrida in “Avances” wondered if there is a more “pressing” and “urgent” problem of responsibility than the one expressed in the question: “What will we do, what shall we make of [or do with: faire de, T.B.] the earth, and of the human earth?”

I suggest that we are now in a position to see how this question is not just one we sovereignly ask ourselves, but one that is posed or brought to us also by the earth and its other inhabitants, and that it is a question in the response to which these earth others can

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5 “Avances,” 27; translation mine. See above chapter 1, FN 84.
participate or are always already participating. This is insofar as they continue to require us to re-consider and re-adjust the general norms and determinations through which we relate to them. In other words, this question is already preceded by a certain responsible engagement with the world and with the earth (as inside as well as outside this world), by the need to already, before any ability to independently ask questions about the earth, decisively, i.e. responsibly, respond to the earth.6 And earth can be understood here as one

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6 This corresponds to Derrida's questioning of the privilege accorded to the question, and to his conception of a responsible engagement that first makes possible any form of questioning and any form of experiencing, but always as non-sovereign. Thus, he writes in a footnote in Of Spirit: “The question is thus not the last word in language. First, because it is not the first word. At any rate, before the word, there is this sometimes wordless word which we name the ‘yes.’ A sort of pre-originary pledge [gage] which precedes any other engagement in language or action…The question itself is thus pledged – which does not mean linked or constrained, reduced to silence, on the contrary – by the pledge of Zusage. It answers in advance, and whatever it does, to this pledge and of this pledge.” (130, FN 5(115, FN 1): “La question n'est donc pas le dernier mot dans le langage. D'abord parce que ce n'est pas le premier mot. En tout cas, avant le mot, il y a ce mot parfois sans mot que nous nommons le ‘oui’. Une sorte de gage pré-originaire qui précède tout autre engagement dans le langage ou dans l'action…La question elle-même est ainsi gagée, ce qui ne veut pas dire liée ou contrainte, réduite au silence, bien au contraire, par le gage de la Zusage. Elle répond d'avance, et quoi qu'elle fasse, à ce gage et de ce gage.”). And Derrida picks this up again in “Eating Well” as indeed describing a position he favors and that is linked to Derrida's notions of trace, différance and alterity: “But there is another possibility that interests me more at this point: it overwhelms the question itself, re-inscribes it in the experience of an ‘affirmation,’ of a ‘yes’ or of an ‘en-gage’ [this is the word I use in De l'esprit to describe Zusage, that acquiescing to language, to the mark, that the most primordial question implies], that ‘yes, yes’ that answers before even being able to formulate a question, that is responsible without autonomy, before and in view of all possible autonomy of the who-subject, etc. The relation to self, in this situation, can only be departure, that is to say alterity, or trace. Not only is the obligation not lessened in this situation, but, on the contrary, it finds in it its only possibility, which is neither subjective nor human. Which doesn't mean that it is inhuman or without subject, but that it is out of this dislocated affirmation [thus without ‘firmness’ or ‘closedness’] that something like the subject, man, or whoever it might be can take shape…” (261/275f): “Mais il y a une autre possibilité, qui m'intéresserait davantage à ce point: elle déborde la question même, réinscrit celle-ci dans l'expérience d'une ‘affirmation’, d'un ‘oui’ ou d'un ‘en-gage’ (c'est le mot dont je me sers dans De l'esprit pour décrire la Zusage, cet acquiescement au langage, à la marque, que suppose la question la plus origininaire), ce ‘oui, oui’ qui répond avant même de pouvoir former une question, qui est responsable sans autonomie, avant et en vue de toute autonomie possible du qui-sujet, etc. Le rapport à soi ne peut être, dans cette situation, que de différence, c'est-à-dire d'altérité ou de trace. Non seulement l'obligation ne s'y atténue pas mais elle y trouve au contraire sa seule possibilité, qui n'est ni subjective ni humaine. Ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'elle soit inhume ou sans sujet mais que c'est à partir de cette affirmation disloquée (donc sans ‘fermé’ ni ‘fermeture’) que quelque chose comme le sujet, l'homme ou qui que ce soit, peut prendre figure.”). And this problematization of the privileging of Fragen is closely linked to Derrida's questioning of the privilege Heidegger seems to assign human Dasein over animals, plants or inanimate nature (Of
instance of what the trace relates us to as the first exteriority in general. In this sense, it would also be one name for that to which we, as selves, relate, but from which we do not simply return – something we described above with reference to the world.

Insofar as the earth and its inhabitants (animate and inanimate) in their complex relational singularity exceed our sovereign ability to ask questions about them and find conclusive responses to these questions they should not simply be seen as subjects to human sovereignty (however divided and complex this sovereignty might show itself to be among humans). They can be seen as beings that shape the way we ask and answer questions that concern them. In other words, we can now understand how it is indeed not simply and first and foremost a question of what to (sovereignly) do with the earth (as if we already knew what the earth and each earth other are), but a question of what to make of it as something never quite given to us, a question of how to position ourselves with regard to it in a way that is never conclusive. What I want to show below is that it is possible (although not necessary) to understand this in social terms and, specifically, through the notion of a shared world. Within such a shared world we would see earth others not just as exceeding and affecting the way we make sense of them (and thus exceeding our world). We would see them as co-inhabitants of a shared social world.

Derrida hints at such a different relationship to the earth, and at least at a pre-

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Derrida, Of Grammatology, 70f.(103). See above chapter 4, FN 38.

**Spirit, 24f.(36f.).** In this text, Derrida says that, within Heidegger's work, the position of ‘the animal’ with regard to the question remains problematic (ibid., 21(41)). This is move that is strategically similar to the way Derrida proceeds in The Animal, where he also wonders whether the uncertainty regarding an animal's ability to properly question things does not equally apply to humans (The Animal, 119f., FN 3(88, FN 2)).
communal and quasi-social bond to it, in the following passage (a passage that we also already quoted above) precisely with reference to singularity:

What I am calling a new *International* both signals the need to radicalize the critique of law, of the state and the nation, and bears witness to an international which carries the promise of itself, which is hearing the promise of a ‘democracy to come,’ linking singularities beyond the structures of the nation-state. This democracy is *not* an abstract utopia. I believe this solidarity, this bond to be what is provoking the gradual and necessary transformation of international law; it renders account of the sense of dissatisfaction we all have toward present events in the world. If no one is happy with the present state of the world, it is because nothing is satisfactory: neither the state, nor the nation-state, nor international law, nor the world ‘order’; and because this dissatisfaction derives in the last instance from a ‘bond’ that demands thought and negotiation. Since this bond between singularities, as well as the promise it carries, is what I call *spectral*, it cannot be made into a community; the promise of the bond forms neither a national, linguistic, or cultural community, nor does it anticipate a cosmopolitan constitution. It exceeds all cultures, all languages, it even exceeds the concept of humanity. A final point: our dissatisfaction requires, at the same time, in the same gesture of thought, rethinking the limits between the human and the animal, the human and the natural, the human and the technical. For the question of animality, that of the earth, of what we may mean by ‘life’ in general also makes up the promise of this bond.  

One thing that Derrida implicitly refers to here is the way that the singular ways we relate to all sorts of others has a tendency to put into question any strict exclusive boundaries through which we constitute certain kinds of communities. We are time and again affected by others (other humans, other animals and other inanimate inhabitants of

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8 Derrida, “Nietzsche and The Machine,” 241. See above chapter 1, FN 83. One example that illustrates one possible way in which such an appeal to an excess over the current order of the nation-state, of culture, of language and humanity can be understood lies in the struggle of certain indigenous movements in Latin America to have certain parts of the lands recognized as political actors – something that the capitalist nation-state, built as it is on the strict distinction between nature and culture and the human and the non-human, cannot ultimately accommodate. For a detailed account in this vein that looks at the current incarnations of indigenous political struggles (specifically in Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia) that have roots dating back maybe as far as the beginnings of European colonization see Cadena, “Indigineous Cosmopolitics.”
the earth) in ways that demand continued re-thinking of the nature and the rigidity of our established communities and that demand perpetual (re-)negotiation of the limits of these communities as well as negotiation with these singularities we encounter.

Importantly, what Derrida hints at towards the end of this quote is that the dissatisfaction that many feel with the exclusion of animals, plants, mountains, rivers and the land in general (however we precisely define this) from law, ethics and community, as well as with a certain restrictive notion of ‘life,’ can also be traced back to these singular bonds that link us in open-ended ways to so many others through a certain responsibility and “solidarity.”

And while these singular bonds cannot themselves be made into a community –

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9 In should also be noted here that one of the challenges that emerge if we aim to act and respond responsibly with regard to these singular bonds is that many inanimate beings are structured in a way that makes it less clear how exactly to individuate them or how to distinguish one presumed individual from another. Most living beings seem to offer us relatively clear criteria of individuation. By contrast, it seems less clear how to determine a certain landscape or a mountain as one being rather than another. However, many inanimate things, like a rock or a mountain or a specific eco-system, can be understood to possess a degree of unity in relation to what is then determined as its immediate surroundings. As David Wood writes in *The Step Back*: “A rock is not a machine or an organism. But even a rock has a certain organized integrity” (157). This does not mean that we have absolute criteria on where to draw the lines between things, but it indicates that not anything goes. A swamp bordering on a forest has a certain integrity by itself that trumps the integrity we find in what connects one half of the swamp to one half of the forest. Nevertheless, there is a way that boundaries seem to become less clear and more fluid if we look at what is inanimate. Indeed, one way to describe death (understood as a transition from animate to inanimate) is precisely that we lose a capacity to self-individuate vis-à-vis our surroundings (both living and non-living). This also means that for certain inanimate beings more than for most living beings, we seem to bear a particular responsibility not just for who or what we include and exclude, or which features, aspects and determinations of another we include or exclude in our experience of another, but also what we include and exclude as constituting someone or something, or what we, conversely, determine as that which is other in relation to another. This is something that Derrida might be in a good position to account for given his strong emphasis on the relational openness of anything allegedly one. Indeed, another way to possibly interpret Derrida's repeated insistence of the intertwinement of life and death might not just be the intertwinement of absence and presence, but also the aporetic relation between a tendency towards individuation and integration (something to which Heidegger, for instance, seemed to accord a certain privilege in his notion of *Versammlung* or gathering, as Derrida points out for example in “Istrice 2,” 305(251)), on the one hand, and a tendency towards disintegration, on the other hand.
insofar as they are also always what can lead to the unravelling of any specific community – they nevertheless can prompt an unravelling of our narrow and rigid notion of community towards a broader and more dynamic one. In other words, on the one hand, these singular bonds do not themselves amount to a particular community. This is insofar as a community must rely on shared and repeatable structures (such as notions of a shared identity or of certain rules that determine the extent of our responsibilities) that these singular bonds always exceed. Thus, the each time unique relationships we have to our friends or to a companion animal can never be fully described with recourse to the general categories we rely on in order to formalize and stabilize these kinds of relationships. On the other hand, these singular bonds can nevertheless motivate and indicate the possibility of the development of a shared world with non-human (including inanimate) beings. They can indicate a way in which we can think of our relationships to earth others as responsible (and perhaps even mutually responsible) and as social in the way they put pressure on the exclusivity of established social structures such as the (imagined) community of humanity, but also of (imagined as well as institutionally maintained) national or ethnic communities.

As Derrida points out, this democracy ‘to come,’ this opening towards ‘each one’ that characterizes democracy,10 is not the description of a utopia. This is not just because it does not refer to a state of completion, but also because the singular bonds referred to

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10 Derrida, Rogues, 54(82). Derrida also notes here that the limits of such a democracy are an open question and one that must remain open. See above chapter 1, FN 74.
here are always already at work. These are the singular bonds that relate us to whatever is exterior to us and that cannot be understood through any repeatable categories. In this sense they are spectral. They are also spectral in that they are at the same time irreducible and constantly affecting any of our general categories as well as affecting us on our various levels of identity. They haunt us. They exceed any specific community we can conceive of (such as the family, the nation-state, humanity etc.) and thus they threaten these communities insofar as the latter are understood and maintained as closed and homogenous. At the same time, they are also what conditions these communities insofar as the spectral bonds are what first relates us to each other in a responsible engagement and what leads us to conceptualize and institutionalize these relationships in order to stabilize them (a stabilization that is always necessary as well as unjust – and thus always unstable). What Derrida is thus talking about are bonds between singularities that can always undo any specific community, but that are also what first enables any community. We are thus, once more, dealing with the quasi-transcendental, something that undoes any specific community, but that can also motivate a movement towards other kinds of communities and indeed a notion of community that is less rigid and more dynamic and open-ended.

This open-endedness corresponds to the fact that Derrida formulates this in terms of questions and promises. This is about the possibility of community, or the conditions of any community insofar as it always to come. And it is always to come because these conditions of possibility are also conditions of impossibility (or what can undo a
community and what keeps it always open-ended and fragile). Thus, as we already indicated above, these singular bonds do not by themselves constitute any specific kind of universal community (such as a global state or community that would include earth others as its citizens and assign specific rights to them or that would establish specific duties or responsibilities we, humans, have vis-à-vis these others). Singularity alone is not enough to constitute any kind of community and it is also always what threatens any specific community insofar as the latter relies on an inside/outside distinction. However, it is precisely through this unravelling based on unpredictable (or always only promised) singular bonds with anything we might encounter that this singularity indicates the possibility for a different kind of community. It is what accounts for the dissatisfaction that so many feel with the factual, legal or normative exclusion of so many people, but also of so many other others, such as animals, plants, or natural sites.

A Non-Sovereign Opening Towards Non-Humans

And importantly, a shift towards different notions of community (as well as different conceptions of related concepts such as ethics, politics, society, responsibility, life etc.) cannot just arise through an intentional sovereign act on the side of humanity (even if we would assume a fictional unity among humans). Rather, it already needs to involve these others that we exclude. Put differently, we might say that the questioning of these boundaries we witness today is already a response to the various engagements in which we find ourselves with the other-than-human world or with the earth.

There is, to be sure, a way in which the exclusive unity of humanity has a
tendency to maintain itself. For instance, most accounts of more environmentally friendly forms of ethics and human society, because they are developed based on arguably anthropocentric concepts, have a tendency to conceive of this shift towards alternative relationships to non-humans as exclusively a human problem and task. This is insofar as it would be a problem that humans can and have to conceive of and address by themselves. However, just like every One (as we saw in chapter 3), we (i.e. the fictional community of humanity) already find ourselves violently affected by that which we try to exclude. We find ourselves affected by these others in a way that must break with the idea of humans simply sovereignly thinking about and acting towards the non-human world.

Doubtless, many of our thoughts about non-human others, whether in the form of contemporary environmental ethics, of nature romanticism or indeed any conceptualization of what we call nature is to some extent motivated and shaped by the myriad ways we find ourselves affected (or not affected12) by what we call nature – for

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11 This is why this shift is often conceived of in purely ethical terms or in terms of what rules of behavior and thought ought to guide human action. This attitude is maybe most succinctly expressed by Bernard Williams when he maintains that “in relation to them [i.e. non-human animals, T.B.] the only moral question for us is how we should treat them,” (Human Prejudice, 141) or it is, we might say, always only a question of how to live with regard to them rather than how to live with them. Of course, to some extent we always talk to a human audience given the nature of academic papers, and given, in particular, that we live in a society that, comparatively, leaves very little room for social and communicative relationships with non-human beings. However, beyond this, there is still a way to take into account, as Derrida does, the non-sovereign nature of thinking and writing – a non-sovereignty that can for example be experienced in the face of non-human others. One way, people have begun to do this is through environmental history, i.e. through a historiography that takes non-human actors seriously. See for example Linda Nash's Inescapable Ecologies or chapter 1 of Timothy Mitchell's Rule of Experts.

12 And it could be argued that any thinking about nature that tries to remain ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ (i.e. that tries to maintain a strict subject/object division) by removing itself from any actually engagement with nature as far as possible – thus enacting materially the very independence that is assumed ideally – is problematic in the same way that any armchair speculation (for example about another human culture) is problematic.
instance, in the experience of fear and violence that we mentioned in chapter 4 with regard to Robinson Crusoe, but also in the experience of beauty or of empathy. Our concepts shift because we are already affected by what we try to exclude through them, i.e. what we try to both forget as well as reduce in its relevance. Examples of what is both excluded in its relevance, but which nevertheless affects many of us, would be the suffering visible in industrial farms and the everyday destruction of all kinds of natural sites.\textsuperscript{13} We could also think about the way we humans (and first of all the most excluded and vulnerable among us) become sick or die because of our interactions with the supposed outside we sometimes call ‘the environment.’\textsuperscript{14} The dissatisfaction that so many feel with the current state of relations between humans and non-humans and the corresponding fact that – to borrow what Derrida says about the relationships between humans and animals\textsuperscript{15} – the relationship between humans and earth others ‘will have to change’ has to be correlated with the countless moments when our lives and our actual

\textsuperscript{13} See \textit{The Animal}, where Derrida indicates that while we can deny that animals can suffer or deny the suffering we inflict on them for a while, we cannot do so “seriously” and “for very long” (26(46): “sérieusement et longtemps”). Today, he says, we can neither deny “the unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal” (“les proportions sans précédent de cet assujettissement de l'animal”) nor the “disavowal that this involves” (25(46): “la dénégation”). Thus, while denial is a possibility, the \textit{undeniability} of our own response to the animal as one who suffers will shift the way we think about these others and it will do so before any question we could sovereignly ask. Derrida writes: “No doubt either, then, of there being within us the possibility of giving vent to a surge of compassion, even if it is then misunderstood, repressed, or denied, held at bay. Before the \textit{undeniability} of this response (yes, they suffer, like us who suffer for them and with them), before this response that precedes all other questions, both ground and cornerstone of the problematic shift” (ibid., 28(50): “Point de doute, non plus, pour la possibilité, alors, en nous, d'un élan de compassion, même s'il est ensuite méconnu, refoulé ou dénié, tenu en respect. Devant \textit{l'indéniable} de cette réponse (oui, ils souffrent, comme nous qui souffrons pour eux et avec eux), devant cette réponse qui précède route autre question, la problématique change de sol et socle.”).

\textsuperscript{14} See below FN 21.

\textsuperscript{15} Derrida, “Violence against Animals,” 64(108). See above chapter 2, FN 197.
experiences with the world, when the bonds we find ourselves in with so many others, resist and exceed the categories through which we divide up the world (for example into entities for which we are responsible and those for which we are not).

What this means for a more intentional shift towards less violent and destructive relationships to non-human others is that it must move in what seems like a kind of hermeneutical circle. Even though the pressure Derrida (along with many others) puts on traditional human-centric concepts can help us to create a conceptual and experiential opening towards non-human others, at the same time, some form of engagement with what is other must precede any shift in concepts – and it must in fact already be at work within Derrida's text despite their seeming focus on ‘words’ rather than ‘things.’

In other words, it is only to the extent we are willing to let ourselves be affected – just as Derrida talks about letting ourselves be affected by the phantasm of the living dead – by all sorts of non-human others that we expose ourselves to a shift in our

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16 Examples for such an affect by non-humans would be the famous encounter of Derrida with his cat, but also his emphasis on pathos, suffering, and being-affected when it comes to the animal question, something which also concerns the way we find ourselves affected by what we do to animals and what is done to animals in our name. As we already said in FN 13, it is something we find ourselves unable to ignore. “No one can deny seriously any more, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves; in order to organize on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence.” (Derrida, The animal, 25f.(46): “Personne ne peut plus nier sérieusement et longtemps que les hommes font tout ce qu'ils peuvent pour dissimuler ou pour se dissimuler cette cruauté, pour organiser à l'échelle mondiale l'oubli ou la méconnaissance de cette violence.”). Thus, this violence and this suffering is something we need to face in thought despite its repression through our current concepts, i.e. our current instruments of thoughts – which is why thinking takes courage (Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 147f. (215f.)) and why Derrida very strongly rejected any characterization of his work as just concerned with words or language or literature (as if these could easily be separated from their supposed opposite) (Derrida, “Afterword,” 148(273)).

17 Beast and Sovereign, II, 149(217f.), see above chapter 5, FN 81.
anthropocentric conceptual landscape\textsuperscript{18} – a landscape that would be problematically anthropocentric both in the sense that it constitutes a violently exclusive anthropocentric outlook and insofar as ‘the conceptual’ itself is conceptualized as the exclusive domain of ‘the human.’ Only by beginning to pay attention to the way we are already opened and vulnerable towards or singularly bound to so many so-called non-human others, can we hope for a shift towards concepts that are more accommodating to these others both in the sense of including them in political and ethical considerations as well as being more attentive to the ways they shape our concepts.

One conceptual form that might serve as a catalyst for such an opening and be a site for it is the development and acknowledgement of social relationships to non-human (including inanimate) others. To begin to understand the possibility of such relationships would be one step towards creating a site for such an increased being affected, a site that would have to be both stable and dynamic, and one that, again in a kind of hermeneutical circle, must itself be developed based on an already occurring exposure to the non-human earth.

\textsuperscript{18} This is one version of statements Derrida has made concerning the non-sovereign character of deconstruction. Deconstruction, as Derrida puts it in \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, is “what is happening today in the world” (I, 76(114), see above chapter 3, FN 86). It is also what happens as a preparation for what we can never sufficiently prepare for, namely the arrival, the coming or the being affected by that which is other. At the same time, because it is never simply a controlled preparation, it already is the experience of another as the invention (or the ‘coming in’) of what can at present only seem impossible (such as a conversation with a stone). Thus, Derrida, as we already indicated at the beginning of chapter 1, says in “Psyche” that “[t]he interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible: that is, of the other – the experience of the other as the invention of the impossible, in other words, as the only possible invention.” (15(27). See above chapter 1, FN 1). In line with this, he says that “[t]o get ready for this coming of the other is what can be called deconstruction.” (ibid., 39(53): “Se préparer à cette venue de l'autre, c'est ce qu'on peut appeler la déconstruction.”).
Such a concomitantly conceptual and material shift towards a more social understanding of our relationships with non-human others would be motivated by, but never permanently founded in, the possibility of singular bonds with all kinds of beings, bonds that we now are often utterly unable to recognize as bonds or (where we are affected by them) as valid. This is because such recognition is difficult to perform based on our current categories, institutions and ways of life insofar as they are, arguably, strongly anthropocentric. We are often unable to recognize these bonds both in the sense of discerning or experiencing them and in the sense of respecting them (both in ourselves\textsuperscript{19} as well in in other people or cultures who actually might discern and respect the validity of human/other-than-human bonds\textsuperscript{20}). In this sense, these singular bonds indicate the possibility of something we might, on the one hand, consider impossible based on most of our current understandings of community, ethics, society, politics, responsibility etc., but that, on the other hand, we can nevertheless relate to in ways that precede any clear knowledge or any clear experience.

They hint at the possibility of a conception of community, society, politics and ethics that would aim to be less narrow, less rigid and less thoughtlessly violent, and that thus – given what we increasingly understand both about the conceptual and the material

\textsuperscript{19} Thus, we might indeed react with compassion when seeing violence towards animals or think there is something wrong when we see images of mountain-top-removal. However, we lack the concepts to make sense of this and thus quickly dismiss or ignore these kinds of emotions.

\textsuperscript{20} Examples of this are the charge of sentimentalism towards those who aim for more intimate relationship with animals or the history (and still existing practice) of thinking of animist cultures as primitive or child-like.
links between human-on-human and human-on-non-human violence\textsuperscript{21} – might be more sustainable.

Derrida has shown an openness to rethink ethics, law, justice and politics beyond the strict human/animal binary.\textsuperscript{22} What I want to propose based on what we have said so far in this chapter as well as in the previous chapters is that the implications of Derrida's thinking of différance, context and the phantasm for our notions of ethics, community,

\textsuperscript{21} This can be fleshed out in many different ways. There is the conceptual mutual reinforcement of certain kinds of oppression (for example sexist and speciesist) that for example Carol Adams has pointed out (see for example her \textit{Neither Man Nor Beast or Sexual Politics of Meat}). There is the way that binary, exclusivist and centrist thinking has a way of operating both within the human sphere as well as between the human and the non-human sphere. Thus, Val Plumwood writes: “A very important feature of the Othering model of human-centredness is that it validates the ecological insight that a human-centred framework is a serious problem not only for non-humans \textit{but for human beings themselves}.” (\textit{Environmental Culture}, 117). There are also the material connections between violence towards what is non-human and humans that we see in so many phenomena such as climate change, pollution etc. This also includes some less obvious connections that seem to be both conceptual and material such as the link that has been observed between contemporary human slavery and environmental devastation. Thus, Kevin Bales' book \textit{Blood and Earth} is partly based on how the author was struck by the way that the extreme brutality towards human beings that is slavery almost always goes hand in hand with utterly ruthless and violent behavior towards the non-human world. There is also the way that different forms of violence compound each other such as the way that the excess consumption of food (and thus of land and water) in wealthier countries affects above all women in poorer countries due to their often low socio-economic status.

\textsuperscript{22} There are many passages that indicate this in \textit{The Animal}, but also in \textit{Beast and Sovereign}. However, there are also somewhat earlier passages such as the following from the “Afterword”: “But there is always something political ‘in the very project of attempting to fix the contexts of utterances.’ This is inevitable; one cannot do anything, least of all speak, without determining (in a manner that is not only theoretical, but practical and performative) a context. Such experience is always political because it implies, insofar as it involves determination, a certain type of non-‘natural’ relationship to others (and this holds as well for what we call ‘animals,’ since, without being able to go into it here, what I am saying implies a rather profound transformation of the concept of the ‘political’ along with several others in order to be able to say that man is not the only political animal).” (136(251): “Mais \textit{there is always something political ‘dans le projet même de tenter de fixer le contexte des énoncés’}. C'est inévitable, on ne peut rien faire, et surtout pas parler, sans déterminer (d'une manière qui n'est pas seulement théorique mais pratique et performative) un contexte. Cette expérience est toujours politique parce qu'elle implique, dans cette détermination même, un certain type de rapport non ‘naturel’ avec l'autre (et cela vaut aussi pour ce qu'on appelle les ‘animaux’ car, sans que je puisse ici m'y étendre, ce que je dis implique une transformation assez profonde du concept de ‘politique’ et de quelques autres pour qu'on puisse dire que l'homme n'est pas le seul animal politique).”\textsuperscript{23}.
politics, justice, law, and responsibility go beyond the human/animal relationships that Derrida mostly (although not exclusively) focused on. I suggest that the singular bonds that link us to anything as present *qua* absent, as possibly responsive and as something we find ourselves in a responsible engagement with, allow us to think the possibility of social relationships even with so-called inanimate nature. Such relationships might not always be able to yield a community (insofar as not all our relations to non-human nature would have to be amicable or understood as part of a specific community – which is not to say that they must necessarily involve destruction and control on the part of the human side). However, they would always be rooted in our responsible engagements with whatever we encounter and they could be understood as based on a different kind of ‘as if,’ one that might be somewhat similar to what we saw Derrida outline with regard to the corpse and one that would be based on a different way of imagining a shared world (which is imagined, as we will see, precisely insofar as it is never simply shared).

To be clear, as we said above, Derrida does not outline a model for a specific kind of community. However, in his tireless criticism of strict boundaries and hierarchical (and thus exclusive) binaries, he did show a certain commitment to avoiding “the worst violence.”23 This would be the violence of attempting to shut down the possibility of discourse, of communication, of interaction or of vulnerable openness to what is other – a temptation that might be understood based on the fact that such discourse or interaction

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does not necessarily (and can never exclusively) mean peaceful interaction, but can and does also – as animist cultures well know – involve war. However, it is precisely because we cannot avoid being affected by what is other that any strict exclusion can always only maintain itself based on a form of perpetual violence. It is thus that we can only hope for the least violence if we are wary of notions of purity and remain open, as Leonard Lawlor puts in his work on Derrida's engagement with ‘the animal,’ to being “corruptible” or affected by another.

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24 As Martin Hägglund points out with reference to Derrida, in opening ourselves to another we always open ourselves to “the best and the worst” (Radical Atheism, 33). Thus, another can also bring violence: “The exposure to visitation is intrinsic to the hospitality I desire, since no one can arrive and nothing can happen without the unpredictable coming of time. But by the same token, the hospitality I desire also opens the door to what I fear. Hospitality can never be reduced to the invitation of an other who is good; it must be open to the risk of an evil visitation. Even the other who is welcomed as peaceful may turn out to be an instigator of war, since the other may always change” (104).

25 See for example Harvey, Animism, 22. For an eco-feminist account of the impossibility to avoid predator-prey relationships see also Val Plumwood's account of her almost lethal encounter with a crocodile in “Being Prey.”

26 Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 145f.(172): “There is war only after the opening of discourse, and war dies out only at the end of discourse. Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. But since finite silence is also the medium of violence, language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it. Violence against violence. Économie of violence. An economy irreducible to what Levinas envisions in the word. If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse. This vigilance is a violence chosen as the least violence by a philosophy which takes history, that is, finitude, seriously.” (“Il n'y a de guerre qu'après l'ouverture du discours et la guerre ne s'èteint qu'avec la fin du discours. La paix, comme le silence, est la vocation étrange d'un langage appelé hors de soi par soi. Mais comme le silence fini est aussi l'élément de la violence, le langage ne peut jamais que tendre indéfiniment vers la justice en reconnaissant et en pratiquant la guerre en soi. Violence contre violence. Économie de violence. Économie qui ne peut se réduire à ce que Levinas vise sous ce mot. Si la lumière est l'élément de la violence, il faut se battre contre la lumière avec une certaine autre lumière pour éviter la pire violence, celle du silence et de la nuit précédant ou réprimant le discours. Cette vigilance est une violence choisie comme la moindre violence par une philosophie qui prend l'histoire, c'est-à-dire la finitude, au sérieux.”).

27 Lawlor, Not Sufficient, 119: “Being infinitely corruptible limits the worst violence with the least violence: every single other is wholly other and every single other corrupts us without being rejected. Every single other is received without being captured. This least violence is what is required for our today
In this sense, the most that Derrida can offer us is a certain attitude or a form of thinking and experience that remains open, flexible, on the move, and that recognizes exclusions as always only temporary and tentative insofar as they are bound to certain contexts and linked to our own responsible engagements. They can never be permanent, absolute or justified with something beyond our responsible engagements with the world. Against this backdrop, I want to suggest a social mode of interaction as one way to concretely conceive of a more flexible and open-ended mode of engagement.

This also means that what we are after here is not just a broader and more extensive version of the way we currently construct many communities. Rather, it is so that there might be a tomorrow.”

28 We can for example not just extend a notion of rights to animals or to nature without also importing a certain injustice and misrepresentation of these others. This is insofar as, as Derrida points out, the notion of rights is fundamentally tied to our idea of the human, which, in turn, is tied to a certain exclusive notion of the human subject. Thus, Derrida says about animal right in “Violence against animals:” “It is too often the case – and I believe this is a fault or a weakness – that a certain concept of the juridical, that of human rights, is reproduced or extended to animals. This leads to naive positions that one can sympathize with but that are untenable. A certain concept of the human subject, of post-Cartesian human subjectivity, is for the moment at the foundation of the concept of human rights.” (64ff.,109ff.): “Il s'agit trop souvent, et c'est, je le crois, une faute ou une faiblesse, de reproduire et d'étendre aux animaux un concept du juridique qui était celui des droits de l'homme. Cela aboutit à des naïvetés sympathiques mais intenables. Un certain concept du sujet humain, de la subjectivité humaine post-cartésienne, est pour l'instant au fondement du concept des droits de l'homme.”

This is similar to the way that a certain notion of democracy that is built on the idea of fraternization cannot be extended beyond this brotherhood to include, for example, sister. Derrida writes in Politics of Friendship: “Democracy has seldom represented itself without the possibility of at least that which always resembles – if one is willing to nudge the accent of this word – the possibility of a fraternization. The phatriarchy may include cousins and sisters but, as we will see, including may also come to mean neutralizing. Including may dictate forgetting, for example, with ‘the best of all intentions’, that the sister will never provide a docile example for the concept of fraternity.” (viii(13): “La démocratie s'est rarement représentée elle-même sans la possibilité au moins de ce qui ressemble toujours, si l'on veut bien déplacer un peu l'accent de ce mot, à la possibilité d'une fraternisation. La phratriarchie peut comprendre les cousins et les sœurs mais, nous le verrons, comprendre peut aussi vouloir dire neutraliser. Comprendre peut commander d'oublier par exemple, avec la ‘meilleure intention du monde’, que la sœur ne fournira jamais un exemple docile pour le concept de fraternité.”).
about developing a form of thought (and eventually of life) that is more open towards, more adaptable and attentive to, more comfortable with difference, change, alterity and relationality – something which, again, does not mark the end of exclusion, but an attempt to rethink the nature of these exclusions (and the communities they enable) as always concrete acts of violence as well as hospitality rather than expressions of a divine, natural or rational law.

29 Thus, Derrida says for example in Specters of Marx that “hospitality and exclusion go together” (176(223): “l'hospitalité et l'exclusion vont de pair.”).

30 By referring to such a law I mean to include any attempt to fully ground the exclusion of non-human beings. We can think here about references to the bible (as well as other sacred scriptures) and in particular the creation myth in the book of genesis that seems to elevate human beings above animals. Often, the strategy is to argue that animals, for instance, are deprived of something that is central to being part of a moral or political community. As regards the latter kind of community (and sometimes the former), language is often seen as something proper to human beings (and as a necessary condition for community). Thus, Derrida writes in The Animal that “[a]ll the philosophers we will investigate (from Aristotle to Lacan, and including Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas), all of them say the same thing: the animal is deprived of language” (32(54): “Tous les philosophes que nous interrogerons (d'Aristote à Lacan en passant par Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lévinas), tous, ils disent la même chose : l'animal est privé de langage.”). Thus, Kant, for instance, “inscribes a limit to any comparison between animal and human society.” (ibid., 96(134): “Kant marque une limite à route comparaison entre société animale et société humaine.”). For Derrida, all these various ways to argue for the exclusion of animals are never simply objective, rational and disinterested. Rather, it is part of a war against animals. Drawing on Adorno, he thus writes: “I think that Cartesianism belongs, beneath its mechanicist indifference, to the Judeo-Christiano-Islamic tradition of a war against the animal, of a sacrificial war that is as old as Genesis. And that war is not just one means of applying techno-science to the animal in the absence of another possible or foreseeable means; no, that violence or war has until now been constitutive of the project or of the very possibility of techno-scientific knowledge within the process of humanization or of the appropriation of man by man, including its most highly developed ethical or religious forms. No ethical or sentimental nobility must be allowed to conceal from us that violence.” (ibid., 101(140): “[J]e crois que le cartésianisme appartient, sous cette indifférence mécaniste, à la tradition judéo-christiano-islamique d'une guerre contre l'animal, d'une guerre sacrificielle aussi vieille que la Genèse. Et cette guerre n'est pas une façon d' appliquer la technoscientifique à l'animal alors qu'une autre façon serait possible et envisageable ; non, cette violence ou cette guerre ont été, jusqu'ici, constitutives du projet ou de la possibilité même du savoir technoscientifique dans le processus d'humanisation ou d'appropriation de l'homme par l'homme, y compris dans ses formes éthiques ou religieuses les plus élevées. Aucune noblesse éthique ou sentimentale ne doit nous dissimuler cette violence.”). And importantly, Kant, along with the other thinkers mentioned above, would also inherit this kind of Cartesianism. What Adorno diagnoses in Kant (and Derrida agrees with him here) is “a negative interest in the animal, an allergic passion, an instinctive [pulsionelle] inflexion, identifying a significant aggravation of ‘Cartesianism’ that becomes a sort of ‘hatred’ of the animal: ‘wishing’ harm to the animal.” (ibid., 101(140f.): “un intérêt négatif pour l'animal, à une passion allergique, à une inflexion pulsionnelle, à
Thus, the singular bonds Derrida talks about can never be simply translated into a certain kind of stable community. They will always continue to destabilize whatever conception of community we develop – which also means that we can never be perfectly inclusive. These singular bonds can thus never be translated into a conception and a practice of universal moral valuation and they also, importantly, cannot by themselves function as reasons for the (institutional, conceptual, practical) realization of these bonds.

This is both because every interpretation of such a bond within the framework of a certain community is also always a betrayal of the singularity of this bond and because the other might also always bring violence and destruction to myself and other others. Nevertheless, these singular bonds are, on the one hand, already at work in and always shifting our notions of ethics, society and community. On the other hand, they can help us to understand the possibility of developing both social and communal relationships to non-human nature. And this possibility might, as we already hinted at above, be of interest to us insofar as it might be part of working towards communities and societies that are more sustainable (morally, emotionally, psychologically, politically, economically.

cette aggravation signifiante du ‘cartésianisme’ que serait une sorte de ‘haine’ de l'animal: le ‘vouloir’ du mal à l'animal.”). Derrida continues: “In other words, the principle of pure practical reason, Kant's ethical project, would be hateful, cruel, criminal, incriminating, criminalized by Adorno and by the logic that he announces and that I am developing here” (ibid., 101(141): “Autrement dit, le principe de la raison pure pratique, le projet éthique de Kant, serait haineux, cruel, criminel, incriminable, criminalisé par Adorno et par la logique qu'il annonce et que je déploie ici.”).

Communal relationships would here refer to particular kinds of social relationship that are characterized by a certain social cohesion that primarily revolves around amicable rather than hostile or indifferent relationships – something which of course is always fragile.
etc.) in their relationships to non-human nature, and that might be so precisely by not simply and categorically excluding non-human nature as both a moral patient and a social agent. To be sure, Derrida is by far not the only one who can help us understand these alternative possibilities. However, I do suggest that the fundamental way he rethinks many of our most basic concepts can be helpful here, and it is a rethinking that is still largely untapped as regards environmental questions.

It is this possibility that I want to understand further now. I suggest that we can understand the possibility of social relationships as the possibility of sharing a world. Furthermore, I argue that we can understand the possibility of sharing a world with inanimate beings based on the fact that, for Derrida, even our ability to share a world with humans (a possibility which allows for social relationships in general as well as for particular communities based on a certain common sense) cannot be absolutely grounded in any particular quality or feature we share. Rather, this sharing of a world (and thus any social relationship, including communal relationships) is always fragile insofar as it must ultimately always be traced back to a responsible and decisive (although non-sovereign) response to others' alterity, a response that itself lacks any absolute grounding.

In other words, our social and communal relationships with human beings – while importantly mediated and shaped by certain features that many humans share – should be seen not so much as the realization of a specific natural or rational telos, but as a specific historically conditioned and socially mediated response to the alterity of other human beings. And this is an alterity that we never simply sovereignly respond to but that first of
all affects us as so many other forms of alterity do (for example a corpse).

However, for Derrida any exclusively human community (a community that of course – outside of philosophical, legal or political idealizations and ideals – does not include all humans or does not include everyone equally) not only always remains fragile insofar as it always remains rooted in the instability of all our non-sovereign, but free (i.e. non-necessary) responses to another (another who demands ever new responses at any moment). It also remains arbitrarily narrow. This is because, as we said in chapter 2, responsibility (including the responsible construction of a community or of a social relationship) is for Derrida ultimately always rooted in alterity, an alterity which cannot be limited to certain kinds of entities. Thus, a shift (however slow and uncertain) towards different kinds of relationships, relationships we might characterize as social, towards non-human nature is conceivable. It is a conceivable possibility insofar as, for Derrida, any responsible relationship begins with alterity. And insofar as this responsibility derives from the singular ways we relate to such alterity (what Derrida referred to above as singular bonds), it can never be tied to and thus limited with reference to any specific characteristic (such as language, consciousness, sensation etc.) – although such characteristics are important to consider if we want to behave responsibly to the other in question.

**The Possibility of Sharing a World**

The World as Fractured and Constructed

As we saw above, the relationship between community and the singular bonds
that link us to so many others is both quasi-transcendental and aporetic. This is insofar as these singular bonds are that which first enables the constitution of any community, while at the same time resisting integration into any stable frame of a community. Thus, they also always threaten to unravel any given communities. One of the ramifications of this is that any community understood through the notion of a common world, a common sense or a common context (and we will say more about how these relate below) is, for Derrida, always fractured as well as constructed in its unity. It is constructed insofar as it can never be absolutely grounded in any universal structure or in any ‘as such,’ instead having the phantasmatic status of an ‘as if’ (we share a world). It is fractured insofar as such a construct only allows us to relate to others as within our world (or as present via a certain shared meaning or context) as also outside of our world (or as absent in another's singular relation to any presumably shared meaning or context). It is fractured, in other words, because we each live in different worlds at the same time that we each live in the same world.

To be sure, Derrida mostly talks about living beings existing together and separately through this constructed and fractured world. However, I suggest that the two features just mentioned (namely the constructed as well as always fractured or present/absent way in which we relate to another within a shared world) allow us to understand the possibility of constructing or imagining a world we share not just with living, but also with so-called inanimate beings. In order to show this, I will first focus on the simultaneously shared and divided character of what we think of as ‘the’ world. I
argue (and this should be seen in close connection to the parallel between our experience of animate and inanimate others we discussed in chapter 3) that the structure that characterizes our sharing a world with other living beings can also be discerned in our relationship to inanimate beings. I then focus on the notions of habitat and co-habitation as providing one hint as to how we might begin to think the possibility of such a community of the world inhabited with inanimate beings. Following this, I address the primary objection against such a notion of a world shared with inanimate beings, namely that they simply do not have anything like a world and thus cannot share in one. I do so with reference to the constructed and indeed pragmatic character of any common world. I end with a brief reference to animist thinking as a form of socially relating to non-human (including inanimate) nature. This is meant to serve as a short illustration of what social relationships to inanimate beings could look like.

The Fractured Character of ‘the’ World

As regards the always fractured character of the world, Derrida expresses this by
making two seemingly irreconcilable claims. On the one hand, he claims that living beings (in particular humans and animals) share a world, that they (“animals and humans”) “[i]ncontestably,…inhabit (habitent) [and the emphasis on habitation will be important below, T.B.] the same world, the same objective world even if they do not have the same experience of the objectivity of the object.” On the other hand, Derrida claims (right after first stating that humans and animals “incontestably” live in different worlds) that “neither animals of different species, nor humans of different cultures, nor any animal or human individual inhabit (habitent) the same world as another, however
close and similar these living individuals may be (be they humans or animals), and the
difference between one world and another will remain always unbridgeable.

This separation can, as we already hinted at above, be understood based on the
singular bonds we mentioned, bonds which, in their singularity resist integration into a
universally shared world of meaning. They refer us to the unbridgeable difference
between my complex relational singularity and that of another that we talked about in
chapter 4. Thus, Derrida writes:

Between my world, the ‘my world,’ what I call ‘my world’ – and there is no other
for me, as any other world is part of it [and it is in this sense that each death is
each time uniquely the end of the world,37 T.B.] – between my world and any
other world there is first the space and the time of an infinite difference, an
interruption that is incommensurable with all attempts to make a passage, a
bridge, an isthmus, all attempts at communication, translation, trope, and transfer
that the desire for a world or the want of a world, the being wanting (en mal de) a
world will try to pose, impose, propose, stabilize. There is no world, there are
only islands.38

Another way to frame this simultaneous sharing and dividing of the world

36 Ibid., 8(31). See above FN 32.

37 See for example the (untranslated) “Foreword” (“Avant-propos”) of Chaque Fois; translation mine:
“Death announces each time the end of the world in totality, the end of every possible world, and each time
the end of the world as unique, and thus irreplaceable and thus infinite, totality.” (9: “La mort déclare
echaque fois la fin du monde en totalité, la fin de tout monde possible, et chaque fois la fin du monde comme
totalité unique, donc irremplaçable et donc infinie.”) While the book was translated as Work of Mourning,
the Avant-Propos was not. See also “Rams,” 160(73f.). See above chapter 2, FN 13.

38 Beast and Sovereign, II, 8f.(31): “[L]a communauté du monde étant toujours construite, simulée par un
ensemble de dispositifs stabilisants, plus ou moins stables, donc, et jamais naturels, le langage au sens
large, les codes de traces étant destinés, chez tous les vivants, à construire une unité du monde toujours
déconstructible et nulle part et jamais donnée dans la nature. Entre mon monde, le ‘mon monde’, ce que
j'appelle ‘mon monde’, et il n'y en a pas d'autre pour moi, tout autre monde en faisant partie, entre mon
monde et tout autre monde, il y a d'abord l'espace et le temps d'une différence infinie, d'une interruption
incommensurable à toutes les tentatives de passage, de pont, d'isthme, de communication, de traduction, de
trope et de transfert que le désir de monde ou le mal de monde, l'être en mal de monde tentera de poser,
d'imposer, de proposer, de stabiliser. Il n'y a pas de monde, il n'y a que des îles.”
between singularities is the notion of context that we already discussed in chapter 4. The common world can be understood through the idea of a shared context, a context that provides a certain “common sense” or “common meaning”\(^{39}\) – a common sense which, as we said in chapter 5, is disturbed for example in the moment of death, something which survivors can often experience as a moment of profound solitude insofar as the (common) world goes on as if nothing had happened or insofar as this world has nothing to offer that seems to do justice to the catastrophic singularity of this death.

Among human beings, this would, for example, be the context of a shared language, a culture, a tradition or, more specifically, of certain scientific, political, or, say, artistic practices. Between humans and animals, we could think, for example, of the context of the household (understood in the broadest sense so that it includes pets and farm animals) or of a shared history of interaction that manifests itself in normatively structured interactions with so-called domesticated animals. We could also (both for so-called domesticated as well as so-called wild animals) think of the context of a certain landscape, of rivers, mountains, lakes, rocks, or of things like rain, thunder etc. And in these landscapes we, like animals, perceive what is external to us in terms of obstacles to and opportunities for embodied engagement. We also share certain attractions (for

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\(^{39}\) Derrida draws this connection between a common world and common sense for example in *Beast and Sovereign*, when he says that “the absence of a common world, the irremediable solitude without salvation of the living being, depends first on the absence without recourse of any world, i.e. of any common meaning [sens commun] of the word ‘world,’ in sum of any common sense [or, as the official translation has it, common meaning: sens commun, T.B.].” (II, 266 (366); translation modified: “l'absence de monde commun, la solitude irrémédiable et sans salut du vivant tient d'abord à l'absence sans recours de tout monde, c'est-à-dire de tout sens commun du mot ‘monde,’ de tout sens commun en somme.”).
example to sugar, water or tenderness) and certain fears and aversions (for example of/to fire, pain, gun shots or extreme heat and cold) with many animals.

However, at the same time, and for both humans and animals, we always relate to each of these shared contexts through other contexts that might not be shared and indeed in a singular way or through a singular bond that is in principle unavailable to another. The relationship of a human who grew up with specific cultural practices concerning food is different from a certain animal's relationships to food (regardless of whether we want to understand these relationships as cultured or not). Similarly, a human person who once suffered from a severe eating disorder or faced starvation has a different relationship to food than one who has not gone through this. And even apart from these generally intelligible contexts, each one of us, as we said in chapter 3, always relates to what is exterior to us in a way that is singular at each moment. Thus, any context we share, no matter how broadly and deeply it is shared, is still given differently to anyone who shares this context. This is a difference that depends on one's singular relation to this shared context as well as the way this relationship is mediated through other contexts that might not be shared. It is in this sense we all live in different worlds.  

Hence, anyone we share a world with is experienced as both within this world, but also, at the same time, outside of this world. What emerges here is again a structure of experience that characterizes our experience of both animate and inanimate beings. If

40 And at this point we also would lack an ultimate reference point to distinguish between a metaphorical and a literal sense in which we live in the same or in different worlds. See below FN 79.
living beings are only in my world as also being outside of this world, the same can be said about inanimate beings insofar as they are (as we showed in chapter 4) always only present *qua* absent. There is something in the singular way they relate to the (shared) exteriority that we call the world that cannot be integrated into my world, but that is – as we briefly hinted at the end of chapter 5 – *there* [là] beyond my life and to which I relate only within the structure of life-death and absence-presence of survivance.

We can experience inanimate things, too, as exhibiting a certain independence in the way they operate in the world, an independence indicating that they are also others that survive, and that survive the end of the world that is my world (i.e. that survive my death). It is through this absence from my world that we can understand the fact that Derrida includes inanimate beings when he wonders whether my relationships to anything, even to what we call inanimate, are not always characterized by a certain prayer or plea (*prière*) to be not absent but “be present to one's own presence” or “to what is coming from me.”

I always hope and pray, we might say, that another is present within

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41 Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 203f.(286f.): “More radically, and we shall measure the stakes of this question later, can one address oneself to someone or indeed to any living being at all – or even something not living – without some implicit prayer coming to bend, to inflect the discourse, or even the simple silent look which, addressing itself to the other, cannot fail to ask of him or her ‘listen to me, please [je t’en prie], listen, I pray you, look at me looking at you, please, turn toward me, turn your attention toward what I'm saying or doing to you, be present to what is coming from me’; and that is the case even if what I'm doing is not simply benevolent and beneficent, generous, giving (one can give love, but one can also give blows): the torturer also prays his victim to receive and to be present, to be aware of the blows he is giving him. One always prays the other to be present to one's own presence. Can, then, this experience of prayer be limited, circumscribed? Or else does it invade the whole field of experience from the moment the other enters into it, i.e. without ever waiting, since the other is what is already, whether I'm expecting it or not, whether I want it or not, etc.?"/"Plus radicalement, et nous mesurerons les enjeux de cette question plus tard, peut-on s'adresser à quelqu'un, voire à quelqu'un de vivant que ce soit, voire à du non-vivant, sans que quelque prière implicite ne vienne incliner, infléchir le discours, voire le simple regard silencieux qui, s'adressant à l'autre, ne peut pas ne pas lui demander: ‘écoute-moi, je t'en prie, écoute, je te prie, regarde-moi te regarder, je t'en prie, tourne-toi vers moi, tourne ton attention vers ce que je te dis ou te fais, sois...
the world present to me (and such a presence must of course always be interwoven with absence) and to what is coming from me into this world. I thus pray or beg (prie) that this, my world, be a shared world.

Co-Habiting a Habitat

I suggest that one way in which Derrida hints at the possibility for a world shared with inanimate beings is through the notion of habitat. This is a notion we can understand as one kind of context (and a notion that thus is equally flexible and dynamic). It is also very closely linked to the notion of a world by Derrida. However, compared to the notion of world, the connotations of the term ‘habitat’ seem slightly more fortuitous in an environmental context. This is both because it has stronger environmental connotations (insofar as it is a term borrowed from ecology) and because it is more flexible insofar as it already suggests that habitats can be shared, but also that each being (including each

présent à ce qui vient de moi’; et cela vaut même si ce que je fais alors n'est pas seulement bienveillant et bienfaisant, généreux, donnant (on peut donner de l'amour, mais on peut aussi donner des coups): le tortionnaire prie aussi sa victime de recevoir et d'être présent, d'être sensible aux coups qu'il lui donne. On prie toujours l'autre d'être présent à sa propre présence. Est-ce qu'alors cette expérience de la prière peut être limitée, circonscrite? Ou bien envahit-elle tout le champ de l'expérience dès que l'autre y entre, c'est-à-dire sans jamais attendre, puisque l'autre, c'est ce qui est déjà, que je m'y attende ou non, que je le veuille ou non, etc.?” I suggest that Derrida would answer these questions in the affirmative given that the other (l'autre) is, as we already saw in chapter 2, indeed constitutive of all experience (see e.g. the interview “Deconstruction of Actuality,” 93/65, where Derrida talks about “experience itself” (“l'expérience même”) as “always experience of the other,” (“toujours expérience de l'autre”)). What Derrida describes here in terms of prayer can be seen as closely linked to the visor effect, insofar as the plea towards the other to be present can be seen precisely as a response to being seen without being able to return this gaze.

42 Derrida seems to switch almost effortlessly between the terms habitat and world in the following passage: “This co-of the cohabitant presupposes a habitat, a place of common habitat, whether one calls it the earth (including sky and sea) or else the world as world of life-death. The common world is the world in which one-lives-one-dies, whether one be a beast or a human sovereign, a world in which both suffer, suffer death, even a thousand deaths.” (Beast and Sovereign, II, 264(365)).
inanimate being\(^{43}\) has its own habitat.

Thus, although Derrida does not develop this point further, the term habitat might hint at an alternative conception of our relation to the exteriority we now call world. It might suggest something less closed, something more divisible and open-ended and less dependent on the notion of some kind of ‘inner life’ than the term ‘world.’

I suggest that in the way Derrida uses it and in its connection to the notion of context, ‘habitat’ might provide an entry point for the inanimate into the community of the world. This is despite the fact that Derrida, at first, only talks about the living: “[A]nd so they [i.e. the beast and the sovereign or what we imagine to be the animal and the human, T.B.] live and die together, the one with the other, the one like the other, they coexist, they sympathize, they are con-vivial, they co-habit the world that is the same, . . . , the question is indeed that of a community of the world that they share and co-habit.” It is this notion of co-habitation of the living (of the world that is “incontestably” inhabit(ed) by both animals and humans who also “incontestably” inhabit separate worlds) that opens this community beyond individual living beings by raising the question of a habitat. Derrida continues: “This co- of the cohabitant presupposes a habitat, a place of common habitat, whether one calls it the earth (including sky and sea) or else the world as world of life-death.”\(^{44}\)

\(^{43}\) One brief indication that Derrida might allow for this is his passing reference to the habitat of a corpse. In the context of the burial of a corpse, Derrida talks about “a sort of instituted habitat would be guaranteed me to the measure of my body” (Beast and Sovereign, II, 161(233): “une sorte d'habitat institué me serait assuré à la mesure de mon corps.”).

\(^{44}\) Beast and Sovereign, II, 264(364f.): “et donc ils vivent et meurent ensemble, l'un avec l'autre, les uns comme les autres, ils coexistent, ils compatissent, ils convivent, ils co-habitent un monde qui est le même,
Importantly, this place of common habitat, the earth, the sea, the sky, and, we might add, the mountains, the rivers, the forests, the deserts, the glaciers should (as Sean Gaston has convincingly argued concerning the earth\textsuperscript{45}) not be seen as a stable anchoring point, a new transcendental signifier. It is not something simply available. Like everything, it is only available in certain contexts and thus in a certain absence. It is something we relate to singularly and as something that is singular in its multiple singular relations to an exterior. In these singular relations it would also be something that involves us as responsible insofar as we are necessarily engaged with these others that constitute a habitat, and engaged in a decisive manner (i.e. deciding or determining this other in its singular undecidability in a way that engages us as responsible). This also means that a habitat, like any ‘outside,’ cannot be simply kept outside the presumed inside of a community of living inhabitants. It must itself be seen as undecidably a part of this co-habitation.

Hence, the co-habitation Derrida describes here would have to be a co-habitation without a stable habitat that contains this community. Any habitat, like any context,
would have to be seen as itself divided and divisible.\textsuperscript{46} We are thus dealing with a co-habitation without an absolute ground, a co-habitation that would derive any stability again only based on certain stabilizing constructs that at any moment can be exceeded by those related in this co-habitation. A habitat then would be where living beings can live and die together, but it would also be that to which they relate and with which they negotiate against the backdrop of different contexts and different habitats.\textsuperscript{47}

While, say, a river, might be part of a habitat in a given place, the river can also be itself seen as inhabiting a habitat that makes it surge or dry out, that affects the life in it or that makes it clean or dirty.\textsuperscript{48} A habitat would be that which can, on the one hand, be seen to constitute the ‘co-’ of co-habitation. However, on the other hand, we can always also shift the context that establishes a specific distinction between habitat and inhabitants in order to show that what Derrida refers to as a habitat above can also be understood through the co- of this co-habitation. Just as in the case of contexts, no habitat is ever stable. It can always be understood as a (co-)inhabitant within another habitat.

Such a co-habitation with what we often see as just the inert background to our actions would, like the community of the world, of course always be fragile. It would

\textsuperscript{46}“Afterword,” 137(252). See above chapter 4, FN 60.

\textsuperscript{47}In explaining habitat through the notion of context I make a move that is somewhat similar to Briggs' argument about the environment (Briggs, “Wild Thoughts,”) and Fritsch's argument about nature as having to be seen as a space of quasi-transcendental conditioning that is never self-identical and always multiple (Fritsch, “Gift of nature”).

\textsuperscript{48}Similarly, we can also see ourselves as a habitat for the microorganisms that inhabit us (for better and for worse) such as the gut bacteria that live in symbiosis with us, parasites or harmful bacteria and viruses.
furthermore be fractured between its co-habitants, who always also incontestably live in their own habitat of which others' habitats are just parts. At the same time, similar to the way that other worlds within my world can actually indicate a co-existence of these worlds within a wider common world, any part of my individual habitat can also be seen as a co-habitant in a wider common habitat.

It is against the backdrop of this undecidability between habitat and co-habitant that we can understand Derrida's above-quoted statement that the singular bonds that relate us to each other also involve the question of the earth. While these singular bonds, as we said above, never by themselves amount to a community, they are, nevertheless, what makes such a community possible (qua impossible and always fragile). This is insofar as they invite certain relations (invitations we can pursue or not, but which we cannot fully ignore as they engage us in a responsible manner). These relations can be stabilized through certain practices, rules, and institutions, but any such stabilization also always remains threatened by the kinds of singular bonds that first invited them.

The earth, as a habitat, cannot be excluded from the co-habitation that it enables – which also means that ‘the earth’ is never given as such, i.e. as present and fully self-identical. Similar to the way that anyone we share a world with is both inside and outside this world, the earth or anything that is of this earth could potentially come to be seen as a co-habitant that is both inside and outside our world, as someone with which or with whom we share a habitat, but which, in their singularity, is also outside this habitat. And it is because of this being-outside, because even inanimate things can, in their singularity,
not be integrated without remainder into my world or into my habitat, of which they are nevertheless a part, that we can think of them as occupying a position with regard to this, i.e. my, world and my habitat, a position that is beyond this world and that would add something to it if we were able to imagine what such a position would be like.

In this sense, the idea of a habitat and of co-habitation can be seen as one way to construct a common world with earth others, i.e. to construct a relation-to-exteriority that we share with them through certain general structures and where we live and die, exist and perish together, but that they also exceed and to which none of us relate in the same way – a difference in relation that correlates to the fact that we all die and perish alone: many earth others die and perish before us, others will survive us. We can think here of local environmental contexts in which fracking can cause earthquakes or global environmental contexts where our burning of certain parts of the earth affects all earth others. Importantly, as we already alluded to above, such a community of the world or of a habitat does not have to be a community in the narrow sense, i.e. one without violence or enmity. It is merely a matter of recognizing another not just as an object within my world, but as a being who shares a world with me. This is to say that we understand this other in their relation to an exterior as relating to me, while also being

49 See above FN 31.

50 Thus, Derrida includes hatred and war in this common world as well. He talks about the common world as “this feeling and this fragile convention that make our loves as much as our hatreds, our so-called ethical or political responsibilities, war and peace, our most quotidian affects no less than our great passions.” (Beast and Sovereign, 267(368): “de ce sentiment et de cette convention fragile sont faites nos amours autant que nos haines, nos dites responsabilités éthiques ou politiques, la guerre et la paix, nos affects les plus quotidiens non moins que nos grandes passions.”).
never reducible either to this relation to me or to this shared world insofar as I relate to it or insofar as it is mine. The world, in other words, could only be thought of as shared with someone who is present in my world as also exceeding it or with someone (or something) who is the locus of an independent existence that I nevertheless can and have to interact with.

Objection: Inanimate Beings Have No World

Now, at this point, it might be objected that we cannot share a world with inanimate beings and not even a habitat. This would be because they do not have a world or a habitat (not even in the mode of ‘not-having’ that Heidegger ascribes to animals and that Derrida discerns with humans as well\(^{51}\)). They simply to not relate do their exterior in a way that involves general structures of meaning that, qua general, we could share with them (i.e. access in the way they access it) as a shared meaning of this exterior.\(^{52}\)

Thus, so the reasoning goes, they cannot share a world with us, and thus Derrida rightly only talks about the community of the world as constructed between the living and brings

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\(^{51}\) Derrida, *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 104(159). See below FN 76.

\(^{52}\) This, I take it, is one way to read Steven Vogel's objection to assigning any form of agency or communicative capacity to inanimate beings. He writes: “One frequently hears claims that animals or nature in general ‘speaks’ to us. This is in a certain unexceptionable sense true, but the sense is a metaphorical one, and one must be careful not to confuse the metaphorical with the literal here. Dryzek himself seems mostly to argue for the possibility of a communicative relation with natural entities on the basis of the discovery of something like ‘subjectivity’ or ‘agency’ in nature; but this begs the question, since communicative ability is itself one of the criteria by which we decide to attribute subjectivity to something. That natural entities act as though they have purposes is not sufficient to show that they are engaging in communicative action: to think so is precisely to confuse communicative rationality with Zweckrationalität, the ability to organize actions so as most efficiently to achieve one's goals. What is crucial is the ability to raise (and defend) validity claims, not the ability to act teleologically” (*Against Nature*, 162).
in inanimate nature only as a background habitat for the life of the living.

In order to respond to this objection, it is important to remember the second aspect of Derrida's conception of world that we mentioned above. We already talked about the fractured character of the world. However, the constructed character of the world is equally relevant as concerns the question of inanimate beings.

In what follows, I argue that, due to the constructed character of the world, whether there is anything that it is like to be a mountain or not or whether they relate to their exterior as something that would qualify as a world is irrelevant as regards the possibility of sharing a world. This is, on the one hand, because the world is always (jointly) constructed. This means that we cannot use the presumably metaphorical character of social relationships to what we deem inanimate (or the fact that these relationships do not get at what an inanimate being is presumed to be as such – but which it can only be in a certain context) to disqualify them. What corresponds to this is that, on the other hand, any common or shared world, any common sense is always a kind of pragmatic device insofar as it ultimately can only be evaluated vis-à-vis the kind of life it enables. Thus, the relevant question is not whether it is true53 that inanimate others share

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53 Derrida himself in fact brings in the criterion of truth and says that the fact that we can communicate for all practical purposes does not mean that we actually ever perfectly share any bit of meaning. He writes: “For it is not enough that we all of us have – you and me and so many others, here and now or wherever and whenever – the vague comforting feeling of understanding each other, of speaking among ourselves the same language, and sharing an intelligible language, in a consensual communicative action, for example in the use of the words ‘world’ (Welt, world, mundo), ‘our common world,’ the unity of the world, etc., that does not suffice for it to be true.” (Beast and Sovereign, II, 267(368): “Car il ne suffit pas que nous ayons tous et toutes, vous et moi et tant d'autres, ici maintenant ou n'importe où et n'importe quand, le vague sentiment réconfortant de nous entendre, de parler entre nous la même langue, de partager un langage intelligible, dans une action communicative consensuelle, par exemple dans l'usage des mots ‘monde’ (Welt, World, mundo), ‘notre monde’ commun, l'unité du monde, etc., cela ne suffit pas pour que cela soit...
a world with us. This is because it is never strictly speaking true, even for human beings, that another shares a world with us – if, that is, we think of such sharing of the world as perfect identity between the way I relate to my exterior and the way another relates to hers. We always only “pretend to give the same meaning, just about the same meaning in the same useful function to similar vocables or signs, etc.” Thus, the

vrai.”).

And this is the question that for example James asks of David Abram’s form of animism: “David Abram, for his part, adopts a very broad, animistic view, based on ‘the intuition that every form one perceives – from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on the blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself – is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations’ (1996: 9–10). He supports this bold claim by suggesting, in Merleau-Pontian mode, that ‘one perceives a world at all only by projecting oneself into that world, that one makes contact with things and others only by actively participating in them, lending one’s sensory imagination to things in order to discover how they alter and transform that imagination’ (1996: 275–6, n. 3). This may be true. But it remains an open question whether, in any particular situation, one’s projections are appropriate (cf. Clarke 2002). As we saw in Chapter 1, our perception of things is always shaped by our involvement with the world and our inherence within it. Even a blade of grass – to take Abram’s example – discloses itself as it does because of the way it matters to us in the living of our lives and because of the various relations it bears to our bodies. Yet this is not to say that it is itself ‘an experiencing form’. True, that claim may be endorsed in a merely intellectual way, as a hypothesis with a non-zero probability of being true. But to the extent that it is lived, it eludes my comprehension. Raimond Gaita argues that it is absurd to suppose that a stone has a ‘rich inner life’, not because there is overwhelming evidence that stones do not have thoughts, feelings etc., but because ‘[t]here is nothing which one can seriously suppose it would be like for [such] propositions to be true’ (2003: 129). To think that a stone has a mental life is not to have failed to appreciate the significance of one or more pieces of evidence, but to have misapplied a concept. I would want to say something similar about Abram’s claim that a blade of grass is an experiencing form. Derrida once confessed that he has felt embarrassed standing naked before his cat (2008: 113). That is understandable. But if Derrida had instead admitted to feeling embarrassed before a blade of grass, his sanity would have been thrown into question. For my part, just as I cannot understand what it would be like to live one’s life as if dogs were mindless mechanisms, so I cannot understand what it would be like to live one’s life as if blades of grass were conscious. The two options strike me as being equally incomprehensible” (James, Presence of Nature, 51).

Furthermore, we would also have to consider that we cannot simply evaluate the sharing of a world through the categories of truth and falsity. This is insofar as concrete notion of truth and falsity can only gain its meaning within the context of such a open-endedly shared world. See for example “Afterword,” 150f.(278f.), where Derrida talks about the fact that linking the value of truth to a context (a context, which is always pragmatically determined) does not suspend this value of truth any more than it does mean that Derrida writes outside of any context (an assumption that is often attributed to Derrida in order to show that he is inconsistent. See ibid. 146(269f.)).

Beast and Sovereign, 267(368). See below FN 87.
relevant question is rather whether it is true to all the others we interact and live with or whether it can enable a community of the world as a space of survivance or of living on together. I now first look at the constructed character of the world. I then show how it establishes the irrelevance of what we think about the inner life (or lack thereof) in inanimate beings. I finally say something about the world as a pragmatic device.

The World as Constructed

The constructed character of a common world is in fact another feature that it shares with a common context. This is insofar as in both cases Derrida talks about the impossibility to ground a world or context in nature and the corresponding need for some kind of police, i.e. some measure of force and violence. Furthermore, this aspect of the police relates to the fact that in both cases he talks about a certain political character of

57 Thus, Derrida generalizes the term police in the “Afterword.” He refers it to that which ensures the unity of a society. He writes: “[T]here are police and police. There is a police that is brutally and rather ‘physically’ repressive (but the police is never purely physical) and there are more sophisticated police that are more ‘cultural’ or ‘spiritual,’ more noble. But every institution destined to enforce the law is a police. An academy is a police, whether in the sense of a university or of the Académie Française, whose essential task is to enforce respect for and obedience to [faire respecter] the French language, to decide what ought to be considered ‘good’ French, etc. But I never said that the police as such and a priori, or ‘the very project of attempting to fix the contexts of utterances,’ is ‘politically’ suspect. There is no society without police even if one can always dream of forms of police that would be more sublime, more refined or less vulgar.” (135(249f.): “Il y a police et police. Il y a une police brutalement et plutôt ‘physiquement’ répressive (mais la police n’est jamais purement physique) et il y a des polices plus raffinées, plus ‘culturelles’ ou ‘spirituelles,’ plus nobles. Mais toute institution destinée à faire respecter la loi est une police. Une académie est une police, qu’on l’entende au sens de l’université ou au sens de l’Académie française dont la tâche essentielle est de faire respecter la langue française, de décider de ce que doit être le bon usage du français. Mais je n’ai jamais dit que la police en soi et a priori fût ‘politiquement’ suspecte, ni ‘le projet même de tenter de fixer le contexte des énoncés.’ Il n’y a pas de société sans police même si on peut toujours rêver de formes plus sublimes, plus raffinées ou moins vulgaires de police.’). Nevertheless, he cautions earlier that “[e]very police is not repressive, no more than the law in general, even in its negative, restrictive, or prohibitive prescriptions.” (132(241): “Toute police n'est pas répressive, pas plus que ne l'est la loi en général, même dans ses prescriptions négatives, limitatives ou interdictrices.”). In a similar vein, he talks about the common world as an insurance police in Beast and Sovereign and adds “basically just the police” (II, 267(368). See below FN 87).
the common, an interest that is at work and that makes any determination of what is common a pragmatic device – something we will return to later.

One way to understand the constructed character of the world is the singular character of the bonds we talked about above. It is the unbridgeable difference between the singularities related through singular bonds that indicates that anything we imagine to be a shared world in which we relate and communicate is constructed and never simply given as such or in nature. Thus, Derrida writes that “the community of the world is always constructed, simulated by a set of stabilizing apparatuses, more or less stable, then, and never natural, language in the broad sense, codes of traces being designed, among all living beings, to construct a unity of the world that is always deconstructible, nowhere and never given in nature.”58

One way this can be understood is the above-mentioned59 impossibility to rely on any stable and fixed meta-context that would be simply given and would allow us to conclusively arbitrate between the different contexts and singular relations through which each of us relates to their exterior and to what we call ‘the world.’ It is because of the absence of such a meta-context (or because we always relate to everything through a specific context as well as in a singular manner) that nothing is ever available as such or as perfectly self-identical, including the world. There is no absolutely shared form of meaning and rationality that we can relate to in absolutely the same way. This is why

58 Beast and Sovereign, II, 8f.(31). See above FN 38.

“[n]o one will ever be able to demonstrate, what is called demonstrate in all rigor, that two human beings, you and I for example, inhabit the same world, that the world is one and the same thing for both of us.”\(^60\) It is because there is no world qua totality (i.e. accessible outside a context) just as there is no meta-context and no meta-language that we cannot access a total perspective that would allow for (and is presupposed by) the demonstration Derrida claims to be impossible.

And one way that the fact that there is no context that is absolutely shared manifests itself is that we cannot assign a definite meaning for the term ‘the world as such.’ In other words, what the term ‘the world’ means cannot be absolutely grounded in anything in the world. Derrida writes just a little further: “[N]othing is less certain than the world itself,…there is perhaps no longer a world and no doubt there never was one as totality of anything at all, habitable and co-habitable world, and… radical dissemination, i.e. the absence of a common world, the irremediable solitude without salvation of the living being, depends first on the absence without recourse of any world, i.e. of any common meaning of the word ‘world,’ in sum of any common meaning [or common sense: sens commun, T.B.] at all.”\(^61\) And because there is no common meaning, or no

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\(^60\) *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 265(366): “Personne ne pourra démontrer, ce qui s'appelle démontrer en toute rigueur, que deux êtres humains, vous et moi par exemple, habitons le même monde, que le monde est une seule et même chose pour chacun de nous.”

\(^61\) Ibid., 266(366): “…[T]he noun ‘world,’ as a word void of meaning or the meaning without use of the word ‘world’ being merely an artificial effect, a cobbled-together verbal and terminological construction, destined to mask our panic (that of a baby who would be born without coming into the world), destined then to protect us against the infantile but infinite anxiety of the fact that there is not the world, that nothing is less certain than the world itself, that there is perhaps no longer a world and no doubt there never was one as totality of anything at all, habitable and co-habitable world, and that radical dissemination, i.e. the absence of a common world, the irremediable solitude without salvation of the living being, depends first
meaningful relation to the exteriority we phantasmatically call ‘the world’ that is absolutely shared between two singularities, there is always the possibility of the experience of solitude, something which Derrida calls “our most constant and quotidian experience.”62 This is not the solitude within a shared world, but “the solitude of worlds, the undeniable fact that there is no world, not even a world, not even one and the same world, no world that is one: the world, a world, a world that is one, is what there is not.”63

Our relationships to others, as they are mediated through a certain common sense of a common world that is never perfectly iterable between one complex relational singularity and another, are thus always fragile as well as “non-'natural’” as Derrida puts on the absence without recourse of any world, i.e. of any common meaning of the word ‘world,’ in sum of any common meaning at all.” (“[L]e nom ‘monde’, comme mot vide de sens ou le sens sans emploi du mot ‘monde’ n'étant qu'un effet artificiel, une construction verbale et terminologique bricolée, destinée à masquer notre affolement de bébé qui naîtrait sans venir au monde, destinée donc à nous protéger contre l'angoisse infantile mais infinie du fait qu'il n'y a pas le monde, que rien n'est moins sûr que le monde même, qu'il n'y a peut-être plus et qu'il n'y a sans doute jamais eu de monde comme totalité de quoi que ce soit, de monde habitable et co-habitable, et que la dissémination radicale, c'est-à-dire l'absence de monde commun, la solitude irrémédiable et sans salut du vivant tient d'abord à l'absence sans recours de tout monde, c'est-à-dire de tout sens commun du mot ‘monde’, de tout sens commun en somme.”).

62 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 266(366f.): “This can, I admit, look like a lot of apocalyptic statements, but it is also the very tissue, the unwoven tissue [tissu sans tissage], the ever unsewn and torn tissue of our most constant and quotidian experience. Perhaps there is too much world in the world, but who can assure us that there is a world? Perhaps there is no world. Not yet and perhaps not since ever and perhaps not ever. I do not say this to roil you up or depress you, but because it is what I must think and say according to the most implacable necessity.” (“Cela peut ressembler, j'en conviens, à des énoncés apocalyptiques, mais c'est aussi le tissu même, le tissu sans tissage, le tissu à jamais décousu, déchiré, de notre expérience la plus constante et la plus quotidienne. Il y a peut-être trop de monde dans le monde, mais qui peut nous assurer qu'il y a un monde ? Peut-être n'y a-t-il pas de monde. Pas encore et peut-être depuis toujours et peut-être à jamais. Je ne dis pas cela pour vous émouvoir ou nous faire de la peine, mais parce que c'est ce que je dois penser et dire selon la plus implacable nécessité.”).

63 Ibid., 266(367): “[L]a solitude des mondes, le fait indéniable qu'il n'y a pas de monde, pas même un monde, pas même un seul et même monde, pas de monde un: le monde, un monde, un monde un, c'est ce qu'il n'y a pas.”
it in the “Afterword.” It is thus that, as we said above, “the community of the world is…never natural” and that the “unity of the world is…nowhere and never given in nature.” The world is always a kind of “non-natural contract,” and, as we said in chapter 3, always involves a certain tekhnē and can never be reduced “to a pure physis.”

What we are thus faced with is the impossibility of a world as totality, which is indicated, first, through the impossibility to show the unity and universality of the world according to the standards of such unity and universality (which is why it cannot be rigorously demonstrated). Second, it is indicated through the fact that “every day, at every moment of the day and night” we (or rather I, each ‘I’ among a presumed ‘us’) can be “overcome with the feeling [and, as in the case of the experience of the life of a corpse, we are again talking about “an affect, a feeling, a tonality of pathos,” T.B.] that between

64 “Afterword,” 136(251): “But there is always something political ‘in the very project of attempting to fix the contexts of utterances.’ This is inevitable; one cannot do anything, least of all speak, without determining (in a manner that is not only theoretical, but practical and performative) a context. Such experience is always political because it implies, insofar as it involves determination, a certain type of non-natural relationship to others (and this holds as well for what we call ‘animals,’ since, without being able to go into it here, what I am saying implies a rather profound transformation of the concept of the ‘political’ along with several others in order to be able to say that man is not the only political animal).” (“Mais there is always something political ‘dans le projet même de tenter de fixer le contexte des énoncés’ . C'est inévitable, on ne peut rien faire, et surtout pas parler, sans déterminer (d'une manière qui n'est pas seulement théorique mais pratique et performatif) un contexte. Cette expérience est toujours politique parce qu'elle implique, dans cette détermination même, un certain type de rapport non 'naturel' avec l'autre (et cela vaut aussi pour ce qu'on appelle les 'animaux' car, sans que je puisse ici m'y étendre, ce que je dis implique une transformation assez profonde du concept de 'politique' et de quelques autres pour qu'on puisse dire que l'homme n'est pas le seul animal politique).”

65 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 8f.(31). See above FN 38.

66 Ibid., 267(368). See below FN 87.

67 Ibid., 88(138): See above chapter 3, FN 35.

68 Ibid., 149(217f.). See above chapter 5, FN 82.
a given other...and ourselves...the worlds in which we live are different to the point of the monstrosity of the unrecognizable, of the un-similar, of the unbelievable, of the non-similar, the non-resembling or resemblable, the non-assimilable, the untransferable, the incomparable, the absolutely unshareable.” And Derrida says that “we know this with an undeniable and stubborn, i.e. permanently denied, knowledge”\(^{69}\) despite the fact that, at times (namely when we do not pay close attention and give in to a certain unavoidable phantasm), the unity of the world seems so obvious.\(^{70}\) It is because of this unverifiable and impossible character of the world as totality that Derrida talks about “the presumed

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\(^{69}\) Ibid.: “When every day, at every moment of the day and night, we are overcome with the feeling that between a given other, and sometimes the closest of those close to us and of those that we call so imprudently and stupidly, tenderly and violently, \emph{our own}, and ourselves – those with whom we share everything, starting and ending with love, the feeling that the worlds in which we live are different to the point of the monstrosity of the unrecognizable, of the un-similar, of the unbelievable, of the non-similar, the non-resembling or resemblable, the non-assimilable, the untransferable, the incomparable, the absolutely unshareable (we know this with an undeniable and stubborn, i.e. permanently denied, knowledge), the abyssal unshareable – I mean separated, like one island from another by an abyss beyond which no shore \[rivière\] is even promised which would allow anything, however little, to happen \[arriver\], anything worthy of the word ‘happen.’” (266\(367\)): “Quand tous les jours, à chaque instant du jour et de la nuit, nous sommes envahis du sentiment si intense qu'entre tel autre, et parfois le plus proche de nos proches et de ceux et celles que nous appelons si imprudemment et bêtement, tendrement et violemment, \emph{les nôtres} et nous-mêmes, ceux et celles avec lesquels nous partageons tout, à commencer et à finir par l'amour, les mondes dans lesquels nous vivons sont différents jusqu'à la monstruosité du méconnaisable, de l'insemblable, de l'intransférable, de l'incomparable, de l'impartageable absolu (nous le savons d'un savoir indéniable et têtu, c'est-à-dire en permanence dénié), de l'impartageable abyssal, je veux dire séparé, comme une île d'une autre par un abîme au-delà duquel aucune rive n'est même promise qui laisserait rien, si peu que ce soit, arriver qui soit digne du mot ‘arriver.’”).

\(^{70}\) Thus, Derrida says that “we should nonetheless recognize for all that this uncrossable difference is what language and the address to the other cross lightly, I mean with the lightness of unawareness, at least for the time and space of an \emph{as if} of social insurance.” (ibid. 267\(368\): “nous ne devons pas moins reconnaître pour autant que cette différence infranchissable, c'est ce que le langage et l'adresse à l'autre franchissent légèrement, je veux dire avec la légèreté de l'inconscience, au moins le temps et l'espace d'un \emph{comme si} de l'assurance sociale.”}).
community of the world,”\textsuperscript{71} and says that the unity of a shared world can only be understood as a social phantasm, a pretense that makes us act and think ‘as if’ we had a common world, something we use to reassure each other “for the time and space of an \textit{as if} of social insurance.”\textsuperscript{72}

And in the absence of a common world that would provide us with the universal meaning necessary for any absolute proof, we do not have certain knowledge that there is no common world either. This is because such knowledge would precisely, if we were to be absolutely certain, depend on a common world. Rather, all we have are certain ways we are affected by what and who is other, for example by the feeling of our solitude \textit{via-à-vis} another or by the phantasm of a common world that we share. It is because we find ourselves first of all undecidably exposed to so many others without being able to turn these singular bonds into a unitary community of a world that would be able to act as a foundation for conclusive knowledge that Derrida says that we know the absence of a common world only as a “permanently denied, knowledge.”\textsuperscript{73}

In other words, precisely because there is no world given to us in nature all each of us has (as regards our relation to others and the world) are the ways we are variously affected by others as both “incontestably” inhabiting the same world as us and as “incontestably” living in their own world. Thus, the phantasmatic character of the world

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 267(367); emphasis mine: “la communauté présumée du monde.”

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 267(368). See above FN 70.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 266(367). See above FN 69.
is itself only available in the mode of a certain \textit{as if} – which once more shows the all-powerfulness of what the phantasm presents us with that we talked about in chapter 4. Derrida writes that it “seems to be \textit{as if} we were behaving \textit{as if} we were inhabiting the same world and speaking of the same thing and speaking the same language, when in fact we well know – at the point where the phantasm precisely comes up against its limit – that this is not true at all (\textit{qu'il n'en est rien}).”\textsuperscript{74} And at this point we are undecidably caught in an aporetic choice: Either I act \textit{as if} each of us know that there is no common world and relate to another on this basis, i.e. relate to another in the knowledge that we are not really related, or I give in to a phantasm of a common world where I am, once more, related to another only phantasmatically, i.e. as not related to me, or as present to me only as absent.\textsuperscript{75}

And what this absence of common world or this phantasmatic character of any common world indicates is not only that we do not have access to the world as such

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 268(369): “\textit{ce serait comme si nous faisions comme si nous habitions le même monde et parlions de la même chose et parlions la même langue alors que nous savons bien, là où le fantasme trouve justement sa limite, qu'il n'en est rien.}”

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 268(369): “And that given this, if \textit{Die Welt ist fort}, if we think we must carry the other, carry you, \textit{ich muss dich tragen}, this can only be one of two things, not a single thing nor three things. Two things, one or the other: 1. Either carry the other out of the world, where we share at least this knowledge without phantasm that there is no longer a world, a common world…2. Or else, second hypothesis, that where there is no world, where the world is not here or there, but \textit{fort}, infinitely distant over there, that what I must do, with you and carrying you, is make it that there be precisely a world, just a world, if not a just world, or to do things so as to make \textit{as if} there were just a world…” (“\textit{Et que, dès lors, si \textit{Die Welt ist fort}, si nous pensons devoir porter l'autre, te porter, \textit{ich muss dich tragen}, il ne peut s'agir que de deux choses, ni d'une seule chose ni de trois choses. De deux choses, l'une ou l'autre : 1. ou bien de porter l'autre hors du monde, là où nous partageons au moins ce savoir sans fantasme qu'il n'y a plus de monde, de monde commun…2. ou bien, deuxième hypothèse, que là où il n'y pas de monde, où le monde n'est pas ici ni là, mais \textit{fort}, infiniment distant là-bas, que ce que je dois faire, avec toi en te portant, c'est qu'il y ait justement un monde, juste un monde, sinon un monde juste, ou de faire en sorte de faire \textit{comme si} il y avait juste un monde.”).
(understood as access through a universal meaning), but also that we do not have access
to another's relationship to what we call ‘the world’ as such, or that our experience of
another is always phantasmatic. It is always only as if we experience another in their
relation to the world – which is, as we saw chapter 4, what it is to experience another.

If we cannot access the world as such, there is no reference point that would
allow us to relate to another in such a way as to be certain that I experience another
exactly in the way she relates to the world, namely in the form of a relation to an as such
that I could absolutely share with this other. We could, in other words, only experience
another as such, if we both had access to an absolutely stable and fixed reference point or
to something as such to which we both could refer as an actual anchoring point for a
common world. However, because there is no such thing, because there is no common
meaning, no common sense that would ever allow us to relate to another in their relation
to the world as such, there is no way to relate to another in their relation to the world as
such (i.e. in the certainty that I experience another as what she/it/he really is or what this
other is in relation to the world as such).

Thus, any meaningful experience of another, any form of communication (even

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76 Ibid., 104(159): “Are we not then justified in saying this, namely that we are also without this world, or
poor in world, like the stone or the animal, or else as Celan says, ‘Die Welt ist fort’ (to which this last line
of a poem in Atemwende adds, ‘ich muss dich tragen’). ‘Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen.’” (‘Ne
sommes-nous pas alors justifiés de dire ceci, à savoir que nous sommes aussi sans ce monde, ou pauvres en
monde, comme la pierre ou l'animal, ou encore, comme le dit Celan, ‘Die Welt ist fort’ (à quoi ce dernier
vers d'un poème de Atemwende ajoute, ‘ich muss dich tragen’)? ‘Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen.’”).
See also The Animal, 159f.(218), and Lawlor, This is not sufficient, 25 : “…man, too, is deprived of this
property, the ‘as such.’”
though we do have “the vague comforting feeling of understanding each other”\textsuperscript{77} is always a translation of the “untranslatable”\textsuperscript{78} and thus always based on a certain phantasm of a shared world that allows me to understand this other's world within my world. However, we never understand this other as such.

Sharing a World With Inanimate Beings

\textit{The Irreducibility of the ‘As If’}

This is relevant to our question concerning the possibility of sharing a world with inanimate beings or of relating to them based on such a shared world, because it means that we cannot dismiss the notion of sharing a world with these others \textit{solely} based on the fact that it would be only \textit{as if} they share a world with us,\textsuperscript{79} i.e. \textit{as if} they relate to the

\textsuperscript{77} Derrida, \textit{Beast and Sovereign}, II, 267(368): “vague sentiment réconfortant de nous entendre.”

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 266(367), where Derrida describes the solitude that separates us like islands in term of the untranslatable.

\textsuperscript{79} As Sean Gaston has pointed out, this rejection of the world as totality and its rendering based on a certain ‘as if’ needs to be distinguished from Kant's idea of the ‘as if’ and the rejection of the world as a totality in \textit{The Critique of Pure Reason}. While Kant leaves open the possibility that there is no world, the fiction of the world nevertheless provides reason with a kind of unity. In this sense, it takes its place within the architecture of reason insofar as it has a clear function within this architecture. This is something Derrida rejects. The fiction of the world remains always fragile, precisely insofar as it is what relates us to what is other. It thus cannot be understood as having a clear function within reason. To be sure, the fiction of the world does mark the only way we can think reality, but not as a rationally organized unity. For Derrida we can not only \textit{not} experience the world as a totality, we can also not access it as the unconditioned condition for experience. For Derrida, in other words, the fiction of the world is not one that itself can be understood through reason and that can be clearly understood in its function and its operation for reason. This also means that this fiction cannot be clearly opposed to non-fiction, because it would itself be the basis on which we distinguish the fictional from the non-fictional as well as the literal from the metaphorical (see above FN 40). In this sense, it remains an uncontrollable, non-programmable fiction (Gaston, \textit{Concept of World}, 113). One way in which this is the case is that the fiction of the world cannot be clearly understood as a legitimate fiction insofar as we lack any absolute point of view from which to determine such legitimacy. Thus Gaston writes: “Derrida once again criticizes the Kantian world as a regulative idea of reason, noting that the ‘as if’ functions primarily as a unifying and totalizing agent. To act as if one can have an idea of the world as a whole is to affirm the overriding and centralizing logos of analogy and proportion” (ibid., 115). The world must be understood not as \textit{the} fiction of unity, but as the always fragile fiction of \textit{one} kind of unity as opposed to another. We always have to reckon with “heterogenous
world in the same way we do and thus in a way that allows us to share this common relation. This is because such an *as if* characterizes our relationship to any other – including human or animal others.

Put differently, the irreducibly phantasmatic character of any shared world means that the fact that a particular way we conceive of another in their relation to a common world might not get at what we think they are as such, does not by itself disqualify the possibility of sharing a world with them. This is because there is in fact no other *as such* that could serve as the absolute measure of which representation of another to a common world is correct or not. Any *as such* is itself only possible based on a certain phantasmatic common sense of the as such.

In other words, because whatever we take another to be as a co-habiting participant of a common world, or because however we relate to them based on the idea of a common meaning of the world, always only operates based on an *as if*, we cannot discount the possibility of sharing a world with non-human beings based on the fact that they might not relate to their exterior in the form of a world and that it is thus only *as if*

"[Derrida, *Rogues*, 121, as cited in Gaston, *Concept of World*, 115). Thus, the fictionality of the world does not just concern its unity per se, but also the kind of unity as well as the kind of ‘moral world’ it gives us. The latter, according to Gaston, is for Kant closer to the traditional notion of a given world (*Concept of World*, 18). Because Derrida does not separate the realm of nature and that of freedom to the extent Kant does, the as if character that Kant assigns to the world as totality, concerns for Derrida also the content of this totality or the kinds of rationality (practical and theoretical) we can see as enabled and disenabled by certain open-ended conceptions of world. Derrida's ‘as if’ is thus dynamic and always vulnerable to change (ibid., 117), where Kant's assign's the fiction of the world a relatively clear and stable function."
we share a world with them. It is always only as if we share a world with another and as if we have a sense of what it is for this other to relate to the exteriority we, humans, call world – although with others who, like so many non-humans, are more other, more unrecognizable, more unlike us it is arguably easier to discern this as if.

Indeed, the term ‘world’ itself is already the focal point and the expression of a phantasmatic community that pretends that each of us humans relates to their exterior through certain perfectly shared structures that are only shared among (certain) humans, but not with inanimate beings and probably not with animals. But, as we saw above, this is already only thinkable based on a certain pretense.

And because our experiences of others as relating to the same world as us (or of relating to their exterior in the same way as we do, namely as (shared) world) are always based on an as if, we cannot disqualify any notion of a common world (including one shared with inanimate beings) solely based on the fact that it is phantasmatic. All that we would do in such a rejection of a common world shared with non-humans and inanimate beings is to favor one way of constructing a common world over another without any conclusive justification – except that we are precisely shaped by the historical phantasm of the world as a world only shared with humans. Thus, the fact that, say, animals might not relate to their exterior in the way we do (and this ‘we’ is, as I said, already fragile and precisely based on an as if), that they might not relate to their exterior as a ‘world’ or not as a or the world as such, does not mean that we cannot construct, over time, a certain fragile accord or agreement (accord) that regulates our relation to an exterior (and this
exterior would here have to be thought as something like a context, i.e. irremediably fractured and never fixed) in such a way as to make it seem common, like a common world. Thus, Derrida writes that “even if the one (Heidegger's hypothesis) does not have the world as such and as such nameable, or is poor in world, [the animal or the beast, T.B.] even if the other is (Heidegger's hypothesis again), weltbildend, [the human or the sovereign, T.B.] the question is indeed that of a community of the world that they share and co-habit.”

I suggest, based on the parallels between the living and the non-living we already talked about in the previous chapters and the singular bonds that relate us to the earth as well as to the sea and the sky, that the same reasoning that Derrida applies here to human/animal relations indicates that we can also conceive of such an accord with non-living beings. In other words, I suggest that it does not matter if rocks or rivers or thunderstorms might not have a world in the sense of consciously experiencing an exterior through certain meanings. What matters is that they are others to us, i.e. what matters is that living and non-living beings affect each other in always singular ways, and that they – something we accounted for above in terms of ex-appropriation – relate to an exterior in a way that can never be made simply present. We thus can, in principle, construct a common world, an agreement that helps us regulate our lives and deaths or the way we exist and perish together.

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80 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 264(364f.). See above FN 44.

81 See above chapter 4.
The World as a Pragmatic Device

Importantly, this does not mean that anything goes, or that there are no better or worse notions of world. However, it means that we would always have to ask questions like: Better or worse for what purpose and in which regard and for whom? The standard for how to determine which phantasm of a shared world is appropriate and which is not, cannot be found in an objective, meta-context (something that science sometimes claims to achieve or at least aim for – although not all scientists believe this and it is not necessary to believe it to be a scientist). It must always be found in other contexts that are never absolute and that cannot be separated from how we are singularly relate to these contexts and are affected by what is other.

And importantly, these contexts and the common world that is maintained and evaluated through them cannot be separated from a certain interest. This is in fact one way to interpret the following passage, which can be read as posing the question of how to establish whether the necessarily maladjusted common meaning or the common world and time within which Derrida tries to relate the world (and time) of Defoe and Robinson Crusoe, on the one hand, and the world (and time) of himself (which also includes the world and time of Heidegger and his notion of ‘world’), on the other hand, is a good or a bad one. He writes:

Is it artificial and unwarranted to bring together all these motifs (the machine technology of the wheel, the self-determining autonomy, the self-destructive compulsion and the autoimmune paradoxes which make of Robinson Crusoe his own destroyer and of Defoe, perhaps his own enemy, his own ‘foe,’ the parrot and the wheel, etc.)? It would be, incontestably, if the point were to claim to impose bad anachronisms on all these texts, those of Rousseau or those of Defoe. I say bad anachronisms because every reading is not
only anachronistic, but consists in bringing out anachrony, non-self-contemporaneity, dislocation in the taking-place of the text.82

This last sentence we can read as bringing out the way that the text is and is not in my world, but also is not in a closed and consistent world of its own. Importantly, Derrida's response is that the decision concerning the valiance of this bringing together of two worlds and two times, of this anachronism, can ultimately only be rooted in whether the common world he sets up to connect these two worlds (and times) strikes his audience as interesting or not:

The distinction between the good and the bad anachronism does not have its criteria outside what the reading-writing that busies itself with a given text, with more than one given text, does, succeeds or fails in doing. I cannot justify in all rigor [and here Derrida uses the same qualification he will use when talking about the impossibility of proving that two of us live in the same world: en toute rigueur,83 T.B.], I cannot prove that I am right by any argument other than this, which is first of all a question or demand [and the demand would here derive from the fact that we cannot circumvent this question in favor of an objective standard, T.B.]: do you find it interesting to listen to what I'm saying and then to read Robinson Crusoe differently?84

I suggest that what we see here in Derrida's emphasis on interest and a certain

82 Derrida, Beast and Sovereign, II, 87(137): “Est-il artificiel et abusif de rapprocher tous ces motifs (la technologie machinique de la roue, l'autonomie auto-déterminatrice, la compulsion autodestructrice et les paradoxes autocommunitaires qui font de Robinson Crusoe son propre destructeur et de Defoe, peut-être, son propre ennemi, son propre foe, le perroquet· et la roue, etc.)? Cela le serait, incontestablement, s'il s'agissait de prétendre imposer de mauvais anachronismes à tous ces textes ceux de Rousseau ou ceux de Defoe. Je dis ‘mauvais anachronismes’, car toute lecture est non seulement anachronique, mais consiste à déceler de l'anachronie, de la non-contemporanéité à soi, de la dislocation dans l'avoir-lieu du texte.”

83 See above FN 60.

84 Beast and Sovereign, II, 87f.(137): “La distinction entre le bon et le mauvais anachronisme n'a pas ses critères en dehors de ce que fait, de ce que réussit ou échoue à faire la lecture-écriture qui s'affaire auprès d'un texte donné, de plus d'un texte donné. Je ne peux pas justifier en toute rigueur, je ne peux pas prouver que j'ai raison par un autre argument que celui-ci, qui est d'abord une question ou une demande : est-ce que cela vous paraît intéressant d'écouter ce que je dis et ensuite de lire autrement Robinson Crusoe ?”
doing is one indication that for Derrida any common sense, any common world is always a pragmatic construct. And importantly, ‘pragmatic’ (like ‘interest’) should here not be understood as indicating the world as a device we can sovereignly and instrumentally deploy to achieve certain goals or satisfy specific interests. This is because the world would be a construct insofar as it is constituted by the multiple ways in which we are in the world and affected by others. It is constituted by what we do, by how we live and die and are affected, at the same time that it is also what constitutes any action and any interest in the world. This is another way to understand the all-powerfulness of this phantasm, this ‘as if’ of the world. In the absence and impossibility of any standard that would give us the world as such, this phantasm designates that which the world is. And the phantasm is this ‘the world’ as that which cannot be circumvented, despite its fragility, and as that in which we act and suffer and live and die.

Hence, what I mean by ‘pragmatic’ here merely indicates that the world, in the absence of an absolute foundation, can only be evaluated and established based on continued interaction and negotiation with what is exterior to me and with all the others in the way they undecidably are and are not in this world. Thus, for Derrida the common world is always a pragmatic device of sorts, but one that cannot serve as an instrument to achieve any goal clearly outside of what this world opens for us. This is because it is only from within this pragmatic space (understood here very broadly as deriving from all the

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85 This can again be related to Derrida’s conception of context, which are also always “pragmatically determined.” (‘Afterword, 148 (274). See above chapter 2, FN 155: “pragmatiquement déterminées”)}
open-ended interactions through which we are related to others in the weave of survivance) that we have any measure of the kind of common world we construct, inherit and maintain.

In other words, the community of a common world, while constructed and always fragile, is nevertheless (and indeed precisely because of that) measured by what happens to it and within it. It is measured by how it succeeds or fails to regulate our relations to all the others who are the only ones who can teach us how to live – and what would constitute success or failure does of course itself not have an absolute measure in that it needs to be again evaluated in a context and with reference to what interests us or how things strike us. It is thus that we can understand Derrida when he talks about the common world as an “agreement” (accord) “to ensure for oneself the best, and therefore also the longest survival by a system of life insurances counting with probabilities and including a clause that one pretend.”

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86 This would be the living with others and with phantoms or ghosts that Derrida talks about in *Specters of Marx* (xvi-xviii[14-16]) and that we talked about at the end of chapter 5 (see above FN 95f.). It is in this passage that Derrida also says that “[t]o live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. At the internal border or the external border, it is a heterodidactics between life and death.” (ibid., xvii[14]: “Vivre, par définition, cela ne s'apprend pas. Pas de soi-même, de la vie par la vie. Seulement de l'autre et par la mort. En tout cas de l'autre au bord de la vie. Au bord interne ou au bord externe, c'est une hétérodidactique entre vie et mort.”). And this would be only possible within the weave of survivance.

87 *Beast and Sovereign*, II, 267(368). This would be “an agreement inherited over millennia between living beings who are more or less anguished by illness, death and war and murder and eating-each-other-alive, etc., an agreement, then, an always labile, arbitrary, conventional and artificial, historical, non-natural contract, to ensure for oneself the best, and therefore also the longest survival by a system of life insurances counting with probabilities and including a clause that one pretend, that one make as if, signing the insurance policy [police d'assurance], basically just the police, out of clearly understood interest – that one pretend, as one says in English (‘one pretends’) for a lying pretense, for a misleading allegation, that one pretend to give the same meaning, just about the same meaning in the same useful function to similar vocables or signs, etc.” (“un accord hérité depuis des millénaires entre des vivants plus ou moins angoissés...})
The world, in other words, is what allows us to live, not as a stable ground, but as an always self-differentiating relational device. It is thus the condition for any specific interest or action we might have or are engaged in based on this life. Or, more specifically, it is what allows us to persist in what we “conventionally” call life, but which, Derrida points out, can also be called death, and which, I suggest, can involve that which, in our world and through our common sense, we call ‘inanimate.’ Derrida thus says that “the presumed community of the world is a word, a vocable, a convenient and reassuring bit of chatter, the name of a life insurance policy for living beings losing their world, a life belt on the high seas that we pretend to be leaving, long enough to spend a moment during which we pretend to say ‘we’ and to be together together [sic], a moment conventionally called life (which is also death)…”

The common world is thus a pragmatic device or construct that is not arbitrary, but is always, at any moment, exposed to what is other and that must be able to navigate these relationships – which is why for Derrida the worst violence would be the one that closes of all discourse or that aims to reduce any opening, any vulnerability to others in par la maladie, la mort et la guerre et le se-manger-vivant, etc., un accord, donc, un contrat toujours labile, arbitraire, conventionnel, et artificiel, historique, non naturel, pour s'assurer la meilleure, donc aussi la plus longue surviv par un système d'assurances sur la vie comptant avec les probabilités et comportant, comme une clause, qu'on fasse semblant, qu'on fasse comme si, signant la police d'assurance, en somme la police tout court, par intérêt bien compris, qu'on fasse semblant, faisant comme si, qu'on fasse semblant, qu'on prétende, comme on dit en anglais (one pretends) pour une prétention mensongère, pour une allégation trompeuse, qu'on prétende prêter le même sens, à peu près le même sens et la même fonction utile à des vocables ou à des signes ressemblants, etc.

88 Beast and Sovereign, II, 267(367f.).

89 See above FN 26f.
the weave of survivance. What would be just would be to learn to live with what “is not. Even and especially if this, which is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, is never present as such.” Learning to live understood as ethics or as what it is to be responsible would be to learn “to learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them.” In other words, to live with all the others, to be open to what all the others in the world have to teach us about how good or bad, how violent or how welcoming our common world is would be the only way to be responsible for a common world as that which allows an ‘us’ to live and to die.

Thus, whether we can share a common world with what we call inanimate beings is not something that can be decided simply with reference to the way things are, i.e. how they seem to be as such, or how they are within our world. At the same time, whether we share such a common world can also not just be decided in a sovereign fashion. It is something that is built over time (even “millennia” and that is always also coming from others who shape and affect the commonality of any common world.

This also means that we cannot judge, confirm or dismiss such a world in advance. This is because the ultimate standard for judging such a common world that

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90 Specters of Marx, xviif.(15). See above chapter 5 FN 96.

91 Ibid.

92 Beast and Sovereign, II, 267(368). See above FN 87.
would relate us responsibly to the earth, to the sea, to the sky, to mountains, to rivers, but also to the dead and to the yet unborn, would be whether it can maintain itself, whether it allows us to navigate our relationships to all the others in a less violent fashion. And this is something that cannot be known in advance and certainly not from within a worldview that radically rejects the possibility of social relationships to what it considers inanimate. It would go beyond this dissertation to establish that such a broader conception of the community of the world would indeed be a risk worth taking (although the sorry state of many parts of the world and of the earth suggests that it might be). All I wanted to establish here was the possibility of not just responsive, but also social and communal relationships to non-human (including inanimate) nature. This, in conjunction with what we said in chapter 4 and 5, can be seen as a supplement to the impossibility of conclusively excluding non-human beings from the purview of ethical responsibility that we established in chapter 2 and 3.

**A Brief Note on Animism**

Now, before concluding this chapter and this dissertation, I want to very briefly point out a way in which this question of social and communal relationships with inanimate beings is not just an abstract (though possibly practically relevant) question concerning future possibilities for environmental ethics and philosophy. Rather, it must be understood against the backdrop of the fact that there always were and that there still are countless communities that include non-human and even so-called inanimate beings, or (to express it from within a Western framework) that there are countless communities
who think of themselves as including other-than-human persons.

One way to categorize these cultures is the term ‘animism,’ and it this term I will use in what follows. To be sure, this is a term that certainly has a fraught history (and that can indeed be seen as part of the justificatory framework for European and Western colonial violence\(^{93}\)). However, it is one that recently was revived as ‘new animism,’\(^{94}\) which offers a more positive and respectful understanding of animist ways of life.

I am not interested here in giving a full account of animism (nor am I able to given my area of expertise as well as my upbringing). Rather, I want to focus on one specific aspect of animism, namely that it can be understood as designating cultures who build and maintain social relationships to certain non-human beings (and to both what we call ‘animate’ and what we call ‘inanimate’ being). For such cultures, as Viveiros de Castro puts it, “the space between nature and society is itself social,”\(^{95}\) and this means even so-called inanimate beings can be seen as social (though not always as “sociable”\(^{96}\) as Graham Harvey has pointed out) and as a kind of person. I want to briefly address these cultures (which of course are among themselves very diverse and should not be

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\(^{93}\) It is thus, like Robinson Crusoe's discourse on non-European people in general and, in particular, so-called “savages” (see for example 134(198); “sauvages”) part of what Derrida calls “the cruelest history of colonialism and imperialisms” (134(197): “la plus cruelle histoire du colonialisme et des imperialisms.”).

\(^{94}\) Harvey, Animism, 3, passim.

\(^{95}\) Castro, “Exchanging Perspectives,” 481.

\(^{96}\) Harvey, Animism, xi: “Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons. Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable).”
seen as possessing a common essence) for two reasons.

First, a reference to animism might be helpful insofar as it may introduce a certain hesitation into any outright dismissal of the possibility of social relationships to what we call inanimate. The actual existence of communities that include other-than-human persons (and the history of ignorance that has and still does characterize Western relationships to these communities) might give us pause and shake the certainty we have in our human-centered worldview and our intuitions regarding inanimate beings. It might, in other words, open a space for a certain ‘perhaps’ that Derrida talked about so much and shake the certainty that Derrida often saw as the source for the worst violence.

Second, and more positively, a brief reference to animism might provide us with a more concrete understanding of what might be meant by social relationships to inanimate beings. This seems to be important insofar as we arguably live and breathe in a “material and cultural world” whose very “conditions,” as Julie Cruikshank puts it, “are underpinned by language that rejects that possibility,” i.e. the possibility of “a country that listens.”  

Now, understanding animism is itself a very difficult and complex task. It is indeed one that (as is the case for every cultural phenomenon) can arguably never be concluded and that depends and is exceeded by actually living as an animist. Thus, I do not claim to provide any definite or conclusive explanation of animism here or to fully understand it. Above all, I am not attempting to give a ‘rational’ account of it (something

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which I deem neither necessary nor commendable). Rather, I suggest that one way to test the idea I developed above, namely that we can understand social relationships to inanimate beings with reference to a world both shared with and exceeded by these beings, is to see whether it offers us some understanding of communities that actually include – or that at least aim to include\(^98\) – such human/non-human relationships (an inclusion which again would have to be understood through the modality of the ‘perhaps’). I do not claim that Derrida offers a superior explanation of animist thinking and practice, but that animism can serve as an illustration of the kind of community with inanimate beings I claimed to be possible here based on the idea of a common world as always constructed, fractured and pragmatically motivated.

The thought that I want to outline very briefly is that the animist attribution of an independent inner life to certain beings we would consider inanimate can be understood as one way to construct a shared world with inanimate beings that also accounts for the alterity of these beings.

There is a wide range of such attributions. To name just a few there is the conception of rocks that listen,\(^99\) of glaciers that actively smell,\(^100\) of lakes responding to

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\(^{98}\) As Harvey points out, animism is not a fixed state of communal being, but describes a certain telos that we can strive for (Animism, 18).

\(^{99}\) See Povinelli, “Do rocks Listen?,” where she talks about aboriginal Dreamings as a way to communicate with certain natural sacred sites.

\(^{100}\) Cruikshank, Do Glaciers Listen?, 8. See above chapter 5, FN 26.
our prayers\textsuperscript{101} or of the earth and the sky as receptive to our feelings of shame.\textsuperscript{102} I claim that one way to understand these attributions is precisely as a form of socially relating to these entities within the community of a shared world. As Nurit Bird-David puts it: “We do not personify other entities and then socialize with them but personify them as, when, and because we socialize with them.”\textsuperscript{103}

What I suggest is that these attributions (along with attributions of kinship that often go hand in hand with them\textsuperscript{104}) can be seen as constituting social experience consisting of both the sharing and the not-sharing of a world. On the one hand, they imply the possibility of understanding the responses of these kinds of entities as responses intelligible within a shared horizon of meaning (a horizon of meaning that

\textsuperscript{101} See Francello, J.A. “The Seneca World of Ga-No-Say-Yeh,” 54, as quoted in Bunge’s *American Urphilosophie*, 15f.: “A mysterious and inexplicable power resides in inanimate things. They, too, can listen to the voice of man and influence his life for evil or for good. Lakes, rivers and waterfalls are sometimes the dwelling place of spirits; but more frequently they are themselves living beings, to be propitiated by prayers and offerings. The lake has a soul and so has the river, and the cataract. Each can hear the words of men and each can be pleased or offended.”

\textsuperscript{102} See the words by a Navajo elder as quoted in Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 70:

“I am ashamed before the earth;  
I am ashamed before the heavens;  
I am ashamed before the dawn;  
I am ashamed before the evening twilight;  
I am ashamed before the blue sky;  
I am ashamed before the sun.  
I am ashamed before that standing within me which speaks with me.  
Some of these things are always looking at me.  
I am never out of sight.  
Therefore I must tell the truth.  
I hold my word tight to my breast.”

\textsuperscript{103} “Animism Revisited,” S78. And she continues: “Recognizing a ‘conversation’ with a counter-being – which amounts to accepting it into fellowship rather than recognizing a common essence – makes that being a self in relation with ourselves.”

\textsuperscript{104} Harvey, *Animism*, 19.
constitutes the possibility of empathy understood as meaningful experience of another, and that, if translated into Western languages and worldviews, seems to apply only to inter-human interactions). On the other hand, the attribution of an inner life also leaves room to understand these responses precisely as responses (as opposed to predictable reactions), i.e. to understand them as not entirely predictable and linked to the singularity of this other being. Empathic relations would thus be one way to think about a shared social world insofar as empathy would precisely refer to the meaningful experience of another, something which, as we saw above, always involves presence and absence: shared intelligibility and inaccessible singular alterity, or, as Husserl put it, the “verifiable accessibility of what is not originally accessible.” It is both of these aspects that describe social interaction based on a common world (i.e. a world in which certain way of relating to one's exterior, such as anger, fear, desire, etc.) that is also always exceeded by those sharing in it (insofar as non-human persons are never seen as entirely predictable).

Conclusion

What I hope to have shown in this chapter (and well as the previous two chapters)

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105 It is because of this constant possibility of exceeding common meanings that animist cultures are often characterized by very sharp attention to their surroundings. Thus, Bird-David interprets the Nayaka people's talking to trees as standing for “attentiveness to variances and invariances in behavior and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them” (“Animism Revisited,” S77). Similarly, Povinelli reports that within the aboriginal Belyuen community “[e]veryone, even small children, monitors bodies, objects, and the environment for changes or odd behaviors that might portend critical meaning” (“Do rocks Listen?,” 509).

106 Husserl, Cartesian Mediations, 114(117). See above chapter 4, FN 17.
is that Derrida cannot just account for the impossibility to conclusively exclude non-human beings from ethico-social relations (as we showed in chapter 2 and 3), but that he can indeed account for the possibility of social and communal relationships to non-human (including inanimate nature). This possibility can be understood based on the idea of singular bonds that relate us to everything and that also make it impossible to separate any so-called natural habitat from the community that it enables. Furthermore, we cannot dismiss social relationships to inanimate beings (for example in the form of empathic and family relations we find in animist cultures) based on the notion that the world is just not like that. This is because we cannot occupy an absolute vantage point that would not involve a phantasmatic or ‘as if’ relationship to the world and that would thus allow us to arbitrate between different world views. The only way to judge different forms of common worlds is with reference to how well or how badly – or how justly or unjustly – they allow us to live on. This of course is something that can itself never be answered absolutely. However, what can be said is that the increasing worry that the current mode of existence that is Western capitalist modernity might be unsustainable must play a role in how we evaluate this kind of common world in relation to other possibilities.

In this dissertation, as I pointed out in chapter 1, I did not attempt to present a strong argument for a specific alternative form of ethics or politics – although Derrida's rejection of clear conceptual limits hints the problematic status of current anthropocentrism. I merely attempted (based on a close engagement with some of Derrida's texts) to outline one way in which we can begin to conceptualize the possibility
of ethical and political relationships with non-human beings and in particular inanimate beings. I cannot pretend of course this an argument for such a possibility would be neutral. It must be read within a global historical context in which the strong exclusion of non-human beings from the realms of ethics, society and politics (which can be seen as one of the founding elements of Western modernity) presents itself as increasingly problematic.
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