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A Genealogy of Violence, from Light to the Autoimmune<sup>1</sup>

Much of the discussion in recent years concerning the relevance of Derrida's work has focused on whether he took an ethical or political turn. For those in favor of such a reading, this turn is dated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the essay "Force of Law" often cited as a decisive moment. The diagnosis is rarely a neutral one. It is usually used by Derrida's opponents to cast the earlier work in a somewhat suspicious light, with the attributed absence of ethical and political issues seen as a cause for concern, and the intimation that his sudden focus on them comes just a little too late. In Derrida's defense, many of his commentators have by contrast argued that there is a striking continuity between the early and later work. They point out that not only have the theoretical tools deployed in the later writings been long present in Derrida's oeuvre, but also cite the explicit treatment of ethical and political topics across forty years of publishing, along with the many interventions that Derrida made outside his published work. There is no turn, so the argument goes, since Derrida has been dealing with ethics and politics all along.<sup>2</sup>

This defense has not been restricted to commentary, or more precisely to commentary by others, since it is one that Derrida himself made on a number of occasions. One of the last of these is in *Rogues*, where, after referring to the relationship between democracy and *différance*, he writes:

I recall this in passing, with a quick turn of hand, in an algebraic and telegraphic fashion, simply to recall that there never was in the 1980s or 1990s, as has sometimes been claimed, a *political turn* or *ethical turn* in “deconstruction,” at least not as I experience it. The thinking of the political has always been a thinking of *différance* and the thinking of *différance* always a thinking *of* the political, of the contour and limits of the political, especially around the enigma or the autoimmune *double bind* of the democratic. This is not to say, indeed quite the contrary, that nothing new happens between, say, 1965 and 1990. But what happens remains without relation or resemblance to what the figure that I continue to privilege here might lead one to imagine, that is, the figure of a “turn,” of a *Kehre* or turning. (39).

Derrida claims that *différance* and politics have always been related, the one has always been a thinking of the other. Yet this is not to say that nothing new happened in his work. It is just that whatever happened in the treatment of the political across his writings should not be seen as a turn. There has been no turn, but this does not mean that there has been no change or transformation.

Accepting this defense neutralizes some of the connotations of the original charge that there was a turn, for one would then disagree with the claim that Derrida’s earlier work ignored politics and ethics. But it also leaves us with many questions. How are we to think Derrida’s relation to political and ethical concerns, across his writings? If there was neither a turn, nor a simple repetition of the same, what has been the shape of this continued engagement? And what would this tell us, if anything, about the meanings of ethics and politics? In this essay I offer answers to these questions by examining one relevant theme, that of violence. In the first half, I

perform a tour of Derrida's analyses of violence, from his first reading of Levinas to one of the last notions he developed, autoimmunity. This will be necessarily selective and too cursory to do full justice both to the several texts in question and to the large amount of secondary literature they have generated. But my aim with this rapid survey is to make apparent a more or less progressive sequence across which Derrida increases the complexity of his treatment of violence in a wide variety of contexts. At the same time, even as this sequence is striking in its consistency and continuity, my analysis demonstrates that it contains one notable omission, something raised in the beginning which is not preserved in the subsequent development. This is the idea of a "lesser violence," a term which appears in "Violence and Metaphysics," but then immediately disappears from Derrida's writings. Much has been made of this notion in commentary on Derrida and violence, and in the second half of the essay I analyze the use to which this idea has been put in some of the literature, arguing that it is incompatible with Derrida's other claims. As a consequence the kind of ethical and political action that one might promote from a Derridean perspective cannot be aligned with a lesser violence, and may indeed involve a greater violence. This, I suggest, poses a challenge not only to some interpretations of Derrida's writings on violence, but also to our general understanding of politics and ethics.

## **1. Violence and Light**

I begin with the first of Derrida's works that took violence as its explicit theme. "Violence and Metaphysics" was published in 1964 (it reappeared in 1967 in *Writing and Difference*), and it analyzes the treatment of violence in the work of Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>3</sup> Levinas paints a pessimistic picture of the totality of phenomenal existence in which violence reigns supreme. Nonetheless, he argues, there is something beyond this violence, namely the ethical relation to

the other. Preceding all phenomenality and is located outside of history, this relation has been obscured in the history of philosophy, in particular in phenomenology which, with its vocabulary of light and emphasis on objective knowing, reduces the other to the same. It is also missing from accounts of mystical communion that in some respects (but not this one) are opposed to the philosophical tradition. Both traditions, Levinas claims, miss the relation to the other and so remain in violence.

However, perhaps because of his rejection of mysticism, Levinas maintains that the ethical relationship takes place through discourse. This, on Derrida's reading, is his fatal error. For Derrida argues that Levinas's writings also show how discourse cannot extricate itself from the economy of the same, and so remains implicated in violence. "If, as Levinas says, only discourse (and not intuitive contact) is righteous [*juste*], and if, moreover, all discourse essentially retains within it space and the Same—does this not mean that discourse is originally violent?" ("Violence and Metaphysics" 116). This being the case, the relation to the other cannot be situated outside the economy of violence—it may be a site of resistance to violence as Levinas claims, but it is a resistance that occurs through recourse to violence. We are thus left with "violence against violence, light against light" (117).

While Derrida thus claims that there is no outside to violence, he does not resign us to a world of violence without distinction. It is here that we meet the idea of a "lesser violence." Derrida first raises this notion in a discussion of Levinas's ambiguous position on technology. Levinas on the whole aligns technology with the tendency to objectify and deny the other, but Derrida claims in a footnote that "Levinas never simply condemns technology. It can rescue from a worse violence [*une violence pire*], the 'reactionary' violence of sacred ravishment, of taking root, ... *within history*—but is it meaningful elsewhere?—every philosophy of non-

violence can only choose the lesser violence [*la moindre violence*] within an *economy of violence*” (313 n.21). Opposed to technology in some respects, Levinas also recognizes that it can be mobilized against communal and nationalistic tendencies that, while not objective, are also violent.

Later in the essay, when Derrida articulates more fully the kind of strategic engagement with violence he sees as necessary, the idea of a lesser violence reappears:

If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence [*la pire violence*], that of silence and the night [*celle du silence et de la nuit*] preceding or repressing discourse. This *vigilance* is a violence chosen as the lesser violence [*la moindre violence*] by a philosophy which takes history, that is finitude, seriously;... The philosopher (man) *must* speak and write within this war of light, a war in which he always already knows himself to be engaged; a war which he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, by risking the worst violence. (117, translation modified)<sup>4</sup>

Derrida’s claim here is that even if we cannot avoid violence altogether, we can choose a lesser violence, indeed we must, if we wish to prevent an even worse violence, which would be the suppression of all discourse. As a consequence, while Levinas is mistaken in thinking that one can escape the economy of violence through discourse, he is right to privilege discourse in the ethical relation. Not to speak is not an effective response against violence. Not only because silence is only ever provisional, finite, and thus already a part of language, but also because the

worst violence “threatens when one silently delivers oneself into the hands of the other in the night” (172). In attempting to refuse language, one makes possible the coming of the worst.

At the end of “Violence and Metaphysics” we are thus left with a vision of a world in which violence is inevitable. There is no position outside this economy in which we might find peace, indeed, if we attempt to escape this economy through the suppression of discourse we make possible the worst. Faced with this situation, Derrida suggests that within the economy we negotiate its inevitability through choosing the lesser violence.

## **2. A Violence of the Letter**

In the course of his argument in “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida claims that the “connaturality” of discourse and violence “belongs to the very essence of history, to transcendental historicity.” Historical or ethnosocial evidence thus “can only support or confirm” this transcendental thesis, and will never constitute independent proof. As a consequence, Derrida suggests that in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, to take one example, the “essential violence” of writing, “cannot be ‘demonstrated’ or ‘verified’ on the basis of ‘facts’”—what is needed in this supposedly empirical domain is a transcendental analysis of violence (“Violence and Metaphysics” 316 n.46). It is this analysis that Derrida performs in *Of Grammatology*. The thesis in this work is strikingly similar to the one outlined above, for again Derrida argues that there can be no outside to violence.<sup>5</sup> On Derrida’s reading, Lévi-Strauss restages the metaphysical opposition between speech and writing, positing speech as original and good, against a writing that is derivative and violent. Relatedly, Lévi-Strauss also presupposes that proper names can exist independent of and immune to the violent effects of difference, that is

writing. Both speech and proper names are conceived by Lévi-Strauss as preceding violence, which will come to befall them as an accident. As he did with Levinas, Derrida argues against this position. He agrees with Lévi-Strauss that “violence is writing” (*Of Grammatology* 135), but denies that speech and proper names are immune to this violence, since they themselves should be understood in terms of a generalized, or arche-writing. Against Lévi-Strauss, Derrida maintains that there is no outside to violence.

Also echoing “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida again resists interpreting this conclusion to mean that everything is violent in the same way. But rather than developing a notion of a “lesser violence,” he instead differentiates violence according to a three-part structure (112). First, there is the “originary violence of language.” This is violence against the integrity of the proper name. The unique is only ever thought within a system of differences, and, so inscribed, its uniqueness is lost. There is here “arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity,... of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated.” The work of difference, which for Derrida is the work of language, does violence to the proper in denying its status as One. Second, “out of this arche-violence” comes a violence that attempts to arrest this movement of difference. This is the violence of the “moral,” “prescribing the concealment of writing and the effacement and obliteration of the so-called proper name which was already dividing the proper.” This second violence denies the originary violence of language, holding that the proper *is* intact and that order can be maintained. Third, there is a violence which “can *possibly* emerge or not (an empirical possibility) within what is commonly called evil, war, indiscretion, rape.” This third violence reveals, against the second violence, “the originary violence which has severed the proper from its property and its self-

sameness [*propriété*].” This is violence in its “common conception,” a violence that arises from the law’s failure to erase the play of difference.

*Of Grammatology* thus argues that it is impossible to move fully beyond the violence of language as difference, and divides this field of inevitable violence into three kinds. There is the originary violence that always inhabits the proper, a secondary violence that seeks to deny this and maintain the integrity of law, and a tertiary violence that may follow from the impossibility of this maintenance. One important thing we learn from this analysis is that violence is rooted in the inescapable difference that inhabits anything that can be called a “self.” Violence thus need not always, or not only, come from others—it is found already in any self’s relation to itself.

### **3. Violence of Foundation/Violence of Conservation**

Derrida’s early work thus presents two accounts of the violence of discourse, both stressing its inevitability, and both—in different ways—seeking to differentiate violence within this inevitability. I now move ahead twenty-five years to Derrida’s “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’” Here the model from *Of Grammatology* is developed and enriched through a reading of Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” resulting in the theorization of a distinction between two kinds of violence, that of the law’s foundation, and that of its conservation. The founding of the law is violent, since, at this moment of foundation, all prior law must be suspended and overturned. Founding the law thus “cannot by definition rest on anything but [itself],” it is “a violence without ground” (“Force of Law” 242). For its part, the conservation of the law also involves violence, since, as Derrida notes following Kant, a law is a

law only if it can be enforced. This enforcing, if done by the State, might be considered legitimate, but it is no less violent.

Derrida claims that Benjamin's essay on the whole attempts to keep these two kinds of violence distinct. His move against Benjamin is to argue that they cannot be separated, for each is contaminated by the other.<sup>6</sup> The violence of foundation gives out onto the violence of preservation "in that it calls for the repetition of itself and founds what ought to be preserved, preservable, promised to heritage and to tradition." Foundation is only ever performed with view to sustaining itself, which will require future acts of violence. Equally, "preservation in its turn refounds, so that it can preserve what it claims to found" (272). Preservation is a reaffirmation of what is in place, effectively operating as a new foundation. Thus, Derrida argues, there are not two distinct types of violence in the order of law, but a chain of violent moments in which the law is both founded and conserved, and this chain reproduces itself. In Derridean terms, it iterates itself—each violent moment involves a combination of identity and difference, of the old and the new, neither an exact repetition of what has gone before nor the appearance of the absolutely novel.

"Force of Law" thus presents a picture of the law that is constituted, and saturated, by violence. Is there anything beyond this legal economy of violence? Benjamin thinks that there is, arguing that non-violence can be found if we move outside the law's order of means-ends thinking. Beyond public law "a non-violent elimination of conflicts is possible in the private world when it is ruled by the culture of the heart" (Derrida "Force of Law" 284). This is a realm of "pure means," which is also for Benjamin "the domain of technology par excellence"—pure technique, without an end in sight. However, just as Derrida argued against an outside to violence in Lévi-Strauss and Levinas, he does the same again with Benjamin. The argument

comes from within Benjamin's own text. For Benjamin also argues that there is another violence beyond means-ends calculations, which is divine violence. Or rather, there are two types of violence in this realm beyond, for Benjamin makes a distinction between the mythic violence of the (Greek) gods, and the divine violence of the Judaic God. Both strike without reason, without end, much like the immediate manifestation of anger, and both are beyond the realm of representation and signification. But whereas the mythic violence of the gods founds and expresses itself through spilling blood, the divine violence of God destroys without bloodshed. This distinction in blood-letting is crucial, for it marks a difference in attitude expressed towards life. In mythic violence, life is sacrificed and not respected. In divine violence, life is sacrificed, but for the sake of the living. Derrida glosses this latter attitude as being "in the name of life, of the most living of life [*du plus vivant de la vie*], of the value of the life that is worth more than life... It is life beyond life, life against life, but always in life and for life" (289).

We will return to this perhaps perverse valuation of life, sacrificing life for the sake of the living, shortly. But for now let us note what troubles Derrida the most in Benjamin's text, namely the association of divine violence with bloodless destruction. This, Derrida argues, is the most "redoubtable, indeed perhaps almost unbearable" feature of Benjamin's text, for it leaves open the possibility of viewing the holocaust as "an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence" (298). That is, beyond language as a system of signs, in divine violence, lies the possibility of the worst violence.<sup>7</sup>

These two themes from "Force of Law"—the contamination of foundation and conservation and the notion of a divine violence outside of all language—both confirm and modify Derrida's earlier analyses in *Of Grammatology*. The violence of the law can be located within the second level of violence—the act of foundation attempts to arrest the play of

difference of originary violence, and its failure to do so makes possible both the tertiary violence of resistance to the law and the necessity of ongoing secondary violence in the repeated attempts to conserve it. We are thus given a compelling illustration of the earlier work's thesis, beyond the confines of Lévi-Strauss's writings, that in many ways gives it life. Rather than a static understanding of secondary violence, Derrida presents a dynamic process in which conservation and foundation give out onto one another through their relation to the other levels. Further, in the earlier scheme the originary violence was that of the proper, of the failure of any proper name to lie outside of violence. This point is here reiterated, and amplified. For in 'Force of Law' that most proper of names, the name of God, also implies violence, perhaps even the worst violence.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. A Violence of the One**

Continuing, our second-to-last stop is in the archive. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* Derrida extends his analysis of violence by examining the concept of the archive and crossing the territory of psychoanalysis. This essay presupposes the claims of "Force of Law," for an archive, Derrida argues, cannot be dissociated from a certain laying down of the law. "[E]very archive... is at once *institutive* and *conservative*. Revolutionary and traditional.... It has the force of law" (*Archive Fever* 7). Archives make the law, and so exhibit the contamination between the violences of foundation and conservation just discussed. In *Archive Fever* Derrida investigates further what goes on in the (repeated) moment of foundation, at least in this context. He argues that archives establish themselves by gathering together the necessarily heterogeneous threads of a history into a unity. This movement of unification always involves violence. "The gathering into itself of the One is never without violence, nor is the self-affirmation of the Unique" (77-

78). Archives suppress difference and alterity in a violent erasure so as to constitute themselves as One.

Again, the point of reference is the analysis in *Of Grammatology*—any movement of unification is a violent suppression of originary difference. And the inevitable failure of this suppression is here given a particular expression. For in *Archive Fever* Derrida argues forcefully that this violence of unification is not just a violence against alterity, against the others of the archive. It is also a violence against the archive itself. This follows from the claim that the necessity of violent conservation is a necessity of repetition, which produces an external location for the archive. The archive's unity is divided at the same time as it attempts to constitute itself. This point is first expressed in the essay in psychoanalytic terms as the inevitable work of the death drive. The death-drive “is at work, but since it always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own.... It works *to destroy the archive: on the condition of effacing* but also *with a view to effacing* its own ‘proper’ traces—which consequently cannot be called ‘proper’” (10). Derrida later summarizes this idea in the idiomatic phrase “*L’Un se garde de l’autre pour se faire violence*” (78). *L’Un se garde de l’autre*: the One guards against *and* keeps some of the other—the One defends against alterity by bringing alterity within. *Pour se faire violence*: in order both to make itself into violence *and* to do violence to itself. In short, the One attacks alterity by incorporating it, and so is violent. But this incorporation is also a disruption of the self, and so the One, in this movement, does violence to itself.

There is thus violence in the archive, a violence against alterity which is also a violence against the self. Further, in aligning this self-violence with the death drive, which is located in the unconscious and “operates in silence,” Derrida reinforces the claim we have already heard more than once, that there is no outside to violence, even when one pushes the limits of

language. And the death drive is not the only figure in this essay that lies on this limit. Derrida also claims that a “spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise” (36). This messianicity “does not mean messianism” and is to come—it has none of the positive characteristics of concrete messianisms and is never present. What is important to note from this discussion is that Derrida here argues that the messianic is never completely beyond language, and thus never beyond violence. This is because “it is in the structure of the future to come that it can only posit itself while welcoming repetition, as much in the respect for faithfulness—to others and to oneself—as in the violent re-positioning of the One” (80). That is, while maintaining a distance from all concrete messianisms, the messianic must nevertheless repeat itself, and so it too is implicated in violence.

## **5. Autoimmunity**

To complete this presentation of Derrida’s writings on violence, I now turn to autoimmunity. This term is deployed extensively in Derrida’s last writings, where he uses it, in particular, to describe a kind of violence at work in democracy.<sup>9</sup> But rather than address these writings directly, I will examine the essay in which autoimmunity makes its first substantial appearance, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” since this forms somewhat of a reference point for Derrida’s later work involving the autoimmune. One of the central concerns of “Faith and Knowledge” is the relationship between religion and technology. In one respect, Derrida argues, religion distances itself from technology. This is because one of the sources of religion is “the unscathed [*l’indemne*] (the safe and sound, the

immune, the holy, the sacred, *heilig*” (“Faith and Knowledge” 93). Privileging the unscathed, religions strive for a purity from the corruptive influence of the mechanical reproduction of the technical. At the same time, however, religions today, particularly in their globalizing ambitions, depend on this mechanical reproduction for their very survival. This reliance is related to religions’ fundamental structure of iterability—being in the world, religions must repeat themselves, inscribing a kind of technology at their very core. The relationship between religion and technology is thus an ambivalent one. Religions react against technology in an attempt to maintain their sacredness, even while they rely on it for their own survival. Religion attacks the very thing that defends it, and this is what Derrida labels a process of autoimmunity:

Religion today allies itself with tele-technoscience, to which it reacts with all its forces. It *is, on the one hand*, globalatinization [*mondialatinization*]; it produces, weds, exploits the capital and knowledge of tele-mediatization... But, *on the other hand*, it reacts immediately, *simultaneously*, declaring war against that which gives it this new power only at the cost of dislodging it from all its proper places... It conducts a terrible war against that which protects it only by threatening it, according to this double and contradictory structure: immunitary and auto-immunitary. (82, translation modified)

Just prior to this passage Derrida noted that the term “autoimmune” is biological in its origin, while at the same time acknowledging that he is moving beyond this context and speaking “of a sort of general logic of auto-immunization” (80). But what is retained from this source is the connotation of life—perhaps more than anything, autoimmunity seeks to describe the intertwining and mutual implication of both life and death that is necessary for survival.<sup>10</sup> This

point is developed further in Derrida's claims regarding the role of sacrifice in religion. Sacrifice occupies the same ambivalent position as technology: Religion implicates "*on the one hand* the absolute respect of life, the "Thou shalt not kill" (at least thy neighbour, if not the living in general), the 'fundamentalist' prohibition of abortion, of artificial insemination... etc.; *and on the other* (without even speaking of the laws of religion, of their terrorism and their killings) the no less universal sacrificial vocation" (86). Stronger still, Derrida sees the relation of religion to sacrifice as itself operating according to a mechanical principle (mechanical "because it reproduces, with the regularity of a technique, the instance of the non-living, or, if you prefer, of the dead in the living" (86)). This principle—and it should sound familiar, since I cited a similar formula from "Force of Law"—states that "life has absolute value only if it is worth *more than* life." This "opens the space of death that is linked to the automaton (exemplarily 'phallic'), to technics, the machine, the prosthesis: in a word, to the dimensions of auto-immune and self-sacrificial supplementarity, to this death-drive that is silently at work in every community, every *auto-co-immunity*, constituting it as such in its iterability, its heritage, its spectral tradition" (87). The valuing of life welcomes death within in an autoimmune movement. Life calls for death in order to live on.

By thus arguing that religion operates according to a process of autoimmunity, Derrida presents religion as fundamentally violent. It inevitably commits a violence against itself—more accurately, against the part of itself that protects it. This particular aspect of autoimmunity—the emphasis that it is an attack against its own defenses—has not appeared before in Derrida's writings on violence, and constitutes much of the promise of the term. But the other characteristics of the autoimmune should be familiar to us by now. First, as I have just noted, the principle of life that is worth more than life appears already in "Force of Law." And since

iterability lies at the very basis of this violent movement, autoimmunity again embodies the same contamination of foundational and conservational violence we saw in this work. Second, as an attack against itself, and in its mention of the death-drive, the violence of autoimmunity follows on closely from the analysis given in *Archive Fever*.<sup>11</sup> Third, autoimmunity demonstrates once again the instability of the proper that was first raised in *Of Grammatology*. If it is “proper” to religion to attack a part of itself, to treat this part as other, then the very meaning of propriety is called into question. Fourth, the violence of autoimmunity is articulated in a discussion of technology, a theme that appears in all of the previous discussions of violence cited.

Finally, “Faith and Knowledge” shows, again, why there is no outside to violence. I have already pointed out how for Derrida that lying on the limit of religion, the messianic, is implicated in violence. Here Derrida reiterates and reinforces this claim. He argues that the messianic, irreducible to any one religion, is “the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice” (56). But while the messianic is the only chance for justice, its promise is inseparable from the threat of the worst. “The coming of the other can only emerge as a singular event when no anticipation *sees it coming*, when the other and death—and radical evil—can come as a surprise at any moment... it ought, exposing itself so abstractly, be prepared... for the best as for the worst, the one never coming without opening the possibility of the other... [the messianic] makes its way through the risks of absolute night” (56-57). Thus yet again Derrida argues that when one pushes the limits of economy (here in distancing oneself from all phenomenal religions), one does not escape violence. Indeed, at this limit one welcomes the possibility of the worst. The messianic, whatever its promise, does not promise a path to peace.

Autoimmunity is thus a new figure in this genealogy of violence, but one that is not altogether new. The word comes from biology, but its characteristics can be found scattered across nearly forty years of Derrida's published writings. And this double aspect of the old and the new, of difference and repetition, in truth, of iterability, extends beyond the operation of this term—it is at work at each stage of the path I have followed. Each time Derrida approaches a question of violence, he invokes the analyses that have gone before, as well as bringing something new to the table. The story thus begins with the argument made against Levinas that there is no outside to violence. This move is made again in *Of Grammatology*, but with a new differentiation of violence. This differentiation is then at work in 'Force of Law,' along with the same claim with respect to the outside, but added are the new dimensions of the contamination of violence in law and the explicit motif of life. All of these features are at work in *Archive Fever*, along with a new emphasis on the violence of the self. Autoimmunity is therefore just the latest move in a consistent strategy of Derridean analysis, where the new is met with the arsenal of the old.

Reflecting on this history, Derrida is thus right to resist the suggestion that an ethical or political turn took place in his work, at least if by this we understand a turn towards ethico-political concerns. One such concern, that of violence, has been one of his constant preoccupations. Which is not to say that nothing new has happened, quite the contrary. For while I have mapped a strikingly progressive history of accumulation, in which each stage relies on what has gone before, it would be wrong to think that everything was simply contained in the origin, waiting to unfold. In addition to the continual redeployment of figures from before, each engagement with violence has also contained something new, something that is not found in the preceding texts. There is, thus, a movement of turning, a progression in a history involving the

constant return and modification of what has been previously passed. But very little in this history can be said to turn towards ethics or politics.

Nonetheless, despite the continuity of this history, there is one theme that does not repeat itself, one motif on which one might say Derrida turns his back—that of “choosing a lesser violence” mentioned in “Violence and Metaphysics.” As far as I am aware, Derrida never again invokes this phrase. This might be surprising, since if violence is inevitable, the most important question for those who nonetheless are not in favor of it would be how to minimize this necessity. And this minimization has certainly been a concern for thinkers responding to Derrida’s work, as much has been made of this “lesser violence” in secondary literature. What I will now argue is that this emphasis on a lesser violence is misplaced, and that there are good reasons why it has disappeared from Derrida’s own writings on violence.

## **6. A Lesser Violence?**

In order to examine more closely the idea of a lesser violence, I will first return to “Violence and Metaphysics.” Derrida’s precise understanding of this idea is somewhat unclear, for he advances more than one claim. Consider the following passage, part of which I quoted earlier:

If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, that of silence and the night preceding or repressing discourse. This *vigilance* is a violence chosen as the lesser violence by a philosophy which takes history, that is finitude, seriously; a philosophy which knows itself as *historical* in each of its aspects (in a sense which tolerates neither finite totality, nor

positive infinity), and knows itself, as Levinas says in another sense, as *economy*... The philosopher (man) *must* speak and write within this war of light, a war in which he always already knows himself to be engaged; a war which he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, by risking the worst violence. (“Violence and Metaphysics” 117)

There are two distinctions drawn implicitly in this citation. The first is between discourse and silence, with the claim that remaining silent is to risk the worst violence. The second is between knowledge and ignorance of one’s situation as finite or historical, and Derrida aligns the lesser violence with a philosophy that has such knowledge. Now the first distinction, as we have seen, *has* recurred consistently across Derrida’s writings. He argues that there is a “temptation to think the holocaust as an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence” (“Force of Law” 298), that the death drive, which “always operates in silence... works *to destroy the archive*,” leaving “nothing of its own behind,” commanding “radical effacement” and “eradication” (*Archive Fever* 13-14), and that the messianic “makes its way through the risks of absolute night” and must be prepared “for the best as for the worst” (“Faith and Knowledge” 57, 56). In each case being outside of language (“uninterpretable manifestation,” “silence and the night,” “operates in silence,” “the risks of absolute night”) opens us up to the possibility of an even worse violence. Here it would seem to make sense for Derrida to speak of the lesser violence, namely that found *within* language. Being beyond language produces possibilities worse than those that are opened when one remains inside, so a philosophy that chooses to stay inside is choosing the lesser violence.

However, we might well wonder just what could it mean to make such a “choice.” For if there is one thing we have learned from Derrida’s writings, it is that we cannot actually inhabit a place beyond language. Derrida argues that all of these figures of the outside—the proper name, speech, the ethical relation, the name of God, the death-drive, and the messianic—are never fully beyond the economy. They are always related to language, to difference, and to iterability. In this way we always remain in the economy, *even* when we remain silent, for silence is only ever provisional. Silence remains a part of discourse, being “the strange vocation of a language called outside of itself by itself” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 117). There is thus *no choice here to be made*, if the choice is for leaving the economy.

The only choice left is the one found in the second contrast, between knowledge and ignorance of this situation. Here Derrida suggests that for a philosophy to know itself as finite, to be aware that it remains in the economy, is to avoid the possibility of the worst violence, and so to “choose” a lesser violence. That this is the choice that really matters in Derrida’s account receives further support from the first passage in which the idea of a lesser violence appears in “Violence and Metaphysics,” part of which I also quoted earlier:

Levinas never simply condemns technology. It can rescue from a worse violence, the ‘reactionary’ violence of sacred ravishment, of taking root, of the natural proximity of landscape. “Technology takes us out of the Heideggerean world and the superstitions of Place.” It offers the chance “to let the human face shine in its nudity” (*Difficult Freedom*). We will return to this. Here, we only wish to foreshadow that *within history*—but is it meaningful elsewhere?—every philosophy of non-violence can only choose the lesser violence within an *economy of violence*. (313 n.21)

The contrast drawn here is between two kinds of violence, both of which lie in the economy. On the one hand there is the violence of technology, on the other the violence of sacred rapture. In affirming technology against reactionary violence, Levinas would be acknowledging the necessity of finitude (since technology is placed firmly within the sphere of the finite) against positions that would presumably be ignorant of this necessity (in so far as the sacred aims for the infinite). In this way, Derrida suggests, Levinas chooses a lesser violence.

At stake in this second distinction between knowledge and ignorance is thus not the choice to leave the economy or not, which, to repeat, is a choice that has been always already made, but the choice one might make within the inevitable economy. Derrida implies that being aware of this inevitability is to choose a lesser violence in comparison to the possibility of a worse violence which resides in ignorance. This second distinction would therefore seem to give substantial content to the idea of choosing a lesser violence.

However, it is worth noting that in contrast to the distinction between speech and silence, the division between knowledge and ignorance *has not* recurred in the genealogy of violence that I have traced in this essay. Nowhere else Derrida emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge in the avoidance of a worse violence. Never again he stresses the importance of being aware of one's finitude as a way of minimizing the risk that a worse violence will arrive. Which is not to say that Derrida ceases to highlight finitude in all that he writes. This he does constantly. But, beyond "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida does not link this attention to a lesser violence. This vocabulary disappears in his subsequent writings.

What is the significance of this turn away from a lesser violence? My contention is that Derrida is right to leave this language behind, for it makes no sense within the logic of his own

analysis. To see this, consider again the messianic. In his later writings, Derrida regularly chooses to privilege the messianic. But the messianic, as I have already cited, prepares “for the best as for the worst, the one never coming without opening the possibility of the other” (“Faith and Knowledge” 56). The messianic is emphasized in a situation of essential ignorance with respect to violence, and this ignorance is irreducible. In choosing to highlight the messianic Derrida does not in fact know what he is choosing, whether it be the best, the worst, the more violent, the less violent, or something else altogether. This means, as with the choice to remain within the economy or not, with respect to violence here too there is no choice to be made. Derrida’s presentation of a lesser violence in “Violence and Metaphysics” is thus misleading and rightly left behind, for one cannot align a lesser violence with a knowledge of one’s finitude.

My claim is thus that the language of “choosing a lesser violence” is out of place in the Derridean analysis of violence. It either names a choice that is either already made (that of staying within the economy) or a choice that cannot be made (that of a knowledge which would reduce violence within the economy). In both cases, this language is redundant. However, it is language that has persisted in commentary on Derrida’s work, particularly when the concern is to find some normative content in his analyses of ethics and politics, and it is to this commentary that I now turn.

To orient my discussion, I will begin with claims made in John Caputo’s *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. This work does not explicitly rely on a notion of a lesser violence, instead invoking non-violence under the sign of peace, but it is instructive to examine because it displays an error in interpretation that I will argue persists in other, less extreme readings. Speaking of the messianic, the notion that underlies his project of developing a “religion without religion,” Caputo writes:

We cannot forget that the distinction between the messianic and the concrete messianisms is always a political distinction for Derrida, one that spells the difference between war and peace, the war that Christianity has waged relentlessly on Judaism, and all the wars among the determinate messianisms... The concrete messianisms have always meant war, while the meaning of the messianic is, or should be, *shalom, pax*. (*Prayers and Tears* 190).<sup>12</sup>

Caputo thus proposes that Derrida's use of the messianic is oriented by a concern for peace. Now Caputo is well aware that pure peace is impossible for us to achieve—he agrees with Derrida's argument that there is no outside to the economy of violence. But in invoking peace in this passage, Caputo shows his reliance on the possibility of a lesser violence within the inevitable economy. The messianic should mean peace, because it offers the possibility of avoiding the war of determinate religion.

It is not too hard, based on what I have discussed, to show how misleading it is to associate Derrida's messianic with peace in this way. As I have already stressed, Derrida argues precisely against this view by claiming that the messianic opens up the possibility of the worst. The point here is thus not just that Caputo is misreading Derrida in linking the messianic to peace, but that Derrida gives reasons for thinking that exactly the opposite is the case. Against this, of course, one might reply that for Derrida the messianic also makes possible something better. But crucial here is how we think the relation between these two possibilities. Caputo aligns the better with the messianic, and while acknowledging that it can be linked to the threat of the worst, places this threat as its less-than-proper possibility. This can be seen by examining

another passage from his commentary. Discussing the “*Viens*” which marks the messianic opening, Caputo writes that

it is not, of course, foolproof and absolutely safe. There is nothing to protect it, absolutely, from ductive violence, nothing to say that *viens* cannot be co-opted into the rallying call of the worst violence, nothing to stop *viens* from being used to lead the charge in which innocents are slaughtered, as the name in whose name the most extreme dogmatic and doctrinal, apocalyptical and eschatological violence, is perpetrated.... That is a risk, a possibility, a danger that is built into *viens*, a risk that Derrida would avert by preserving *viens* in its indeterminability, its indefiniteness... It is just this indefinite indeterminacy that would keep safe. (98-99).<sup>13</sup>

We might first note the tension in this passage—on the one hand Caputo affirms the impossibility of safety, and on the other he argues that Derrida would avert the risk through maintaining indeterminacy. But most relevant to my point are the effects of Caputo’s phrasing. By describing the *viens* as being “co-opted into the rallying call,” “being used to lead the charge,” and as a name “in whose name” violence is performed, Caputo implies that these perversions of the *viens* befall it as accidents. They are imperfect uses of the *viens* that can be kept somehow separate from its positive possibilities.

Caputo’s error is thus to have faith that the openness of the messianic will bring about a violence less than that produced by the partial closures of determinate messianisms. One might be able to give an independent justification for this faith, but it does not follow from the Derridean point of view. And while Caputo’s appeals to peace place him as one of the more

extreme champions of a lesser violence in Derrida's thinking, he is not alone in his embrace of this notion. A second, seemingly alternative approach to this issue is given by Richard Beardsworth in *Derrida & the Political*. Beardsworth explains the economy of a lesser violence by stressing recognition as its condition:

Here emerges the political dimension to Derridean thinking – as an account of the institution as violence, and, in the recognition of necessary violence, of a transformative renegotiation of the institution in terms of a “lesser violence”. In other words, Derrida's account of the mark in terms of a tertiary structure of violence recognizes the necessity of violence in such a way that the terms of this violence can be transformed. (*Derrida & the Political* 19-20)

This position would appear more promising than Caputo's as it does not place its hopes in the messianic, a notion Derrida argues leaves open the possibility of the worst. Instead Beardsworth promotes the more general claim that it is the recognition of the inevitability of violence which can produce a lesser violence. By acknowledging the irreducibility of the aporias of time and law (an irreducibility that implicates an inevitable violence), “one judges according to a ‘lesser violence’” (xiv).

Instead of focusing on the relevant passages from “Violence and Metaphysics,” Beardsworth makes his argument by examining the tertiary structure of violence theorized in *Of Grammatology*. But it remains that the former essay influences Beardsworth's reading, precisely in his emphasis on the need for *recognizing* the inevitability of violence. This is consistent with Derrida's talk of self-knowledge, which, as we have seen, appears in “Violence and

Metaphysics” but nowhere else, certainly not in *Of Grammatology*. However, as I have argued, this notion of recognition does not fit with the logic of Derrida’s analyses of violence. This is evident in Beardsworth’s inability to explain just how such recognition might aid the project of violence minimization. In what way would recognition lead to a reduction in violence, given that violence is inevitable? Beardsworth offers the following reason:

If it is only in the passage through the transcendental that the originary structure of violence is opened up... then it is in fact only through the experience of the economy of violence that judgements of lesser violence can be made. The economy of law cannot be resolved (its structure of repetition is irreducible), it will always make one’s judgements a “fate” – hence no politics of deconstruction. It can, however, be taken into account *in such a way* that one’s judgements are made in recognition of the law of contamination which at the same time exceeds them. (24-25)

Beardsworth here implies that by opening up the originary structure of violence one will be in a better position to recognize the essential operation of violence that is always at work in the economy of law. This, presumably, will allow one to then judge according to a lesser violence. We can understand how, under the influence of “Violence and Metaphysics,” Beardsworth is able to elicit such a claim from *Of Grammatology*’s tertiary structure of violence. For recall that secondary violence—that of the law—is there presented as the covering over of originary violence, the arresting of the movement of difference that is the arche-violence of the proper. This might lead one to believe that if this covering over is resisted, and “the originary structure

of violence is opened up,” then an overall reduction of violence will be produced. Without this particular violence of closure in operation, there would be less violence taking place.

However, put in these terms, we see that Beardsworth’s position reduces to a faith in openness over closure as that which can bring about a lesser violence. We already have seen that this fails to make sense in the Derridean framework. Any opening up is always accompanied by a closing down, even an opening up that seeks to undo some other action of closure. This is inevitable, and there is no way of telling if the subsequent closure will produce a greater or lesser violence than the closure of the law one is seeking to expose. In short, Beardsworth’s affirmation of the recognition of violence is reduced to an affirmation of openness, and his position thus reveals itself to be merely a more sophisticated reproduction of that of Caputo.

The difficulty of avoiding this position is also made apparent in the work of another theorist engaging with the idea of a lesser violence, Matthias Fritsch. In his essay “Derrida’s Democracy to Come,” Fritsch confronts the problem of how to move from claims concerning the necessity of openness in the structure of iterability in Derrida’s work to a normative sphere that would advocate such openness. Having argued that one cannot rely on the principle of non-contradiction to make this move, Fritsch entertains the possibility of recourse to the notion of a “lesser violence,” in particular when framed in terms of the recognition of inevitable violence. But how might this work? Fritsch first argues against the strong claim that a “reduction in violence is, in all contexts, achieved by unconditional hospitality and openness to the future to come” (“Derrida’s Democracy to Come” 587). Here his reasoning is in accord with what I have already argued—noting, as I have done above, that openness for Derrida always takes place in a situation of uncertainty, in which one is open to the best and the worst, Fritsch rightly concludes that “political invention must be open to decide against openness: surely, there are singular

situations where openness to the other is inadvisable, where a reduction of violence is to be expected not from unconditional hospitality but from (further) conditions, demands, and normative expectations placed on the other” (588). That is, an affirmation of openness, such as that promoted in Caputo’s interpretation of the messianic and underlying Beardsworth’s account of the importance of recognition, offers no guarantee for the reduction of violence.

However, even as he argues against a reliance on openness, it returns in a modified form in what Fritsch then goes on to promote. In lieu of this universal recommendation for openness, Fritsch suggests Derrida may argue

that the absence of an opening, the contentment with existing conditions and institutions, and the failure to recognize ineluctable aporias, can, and often does, lead to a violence that can be reduced by the ethical demand for unconditional hospitality and openness to the future. Given the (quasi-transcendental) impossibility of closing political entities and structures once and for all, the attempt to do so may be expected to generate unnecessary violence. (589)

That is, Fritsch retains the link between the recognition of inevitable violence understood as a resistance to closure, and a reduction in violence.

Now it should be noted that Fritsch advances these claims with caution. He notes at the outset that he “cannot be certain that Derrida would subscribe to this argument, though it has been advanced, and attributed to Derrida, by some of his commentators, and can be reconstructed from several Derridean passages,” and acknowledges that “the difficulties of first defining and then measuring violence are, of course, enormous, especially in the light of Derrida’s account of

originary violence, and the aporia of undecidability” (587). Further, Fritsch later mentions in a footnote “the notorious problem of distinguishing necessary from unnecessary violence” (597 n.64). The question is, therefore, whether these points are enough to render implausible the account of lesser violence in the first place. I have been arguing that they are, especially the last since Fritsch’s reduced proposal relies on precisely the ability to distinguish necessary and unnecessary violence. How would one know which violence is unnecessary? By Fritsch’s own argument, it cannot be the violence that follows from closure, both because closure is inevitable (suggesting that this violence is necessary) and because the resistance to closure through an affirmation of openness does not guarantee that violence will be reduced. But it is precisely by aligning unnecessary violence with closure that he advances his suggestion. Fritsch thus provides excellent reasons for why even his more modest understanding of a politics of lesser violence will not work in framework of the Derridean analysis of violence.<sup>14</sup>

These interpretations testify to the appeal of Derrida’s formulation of “choosing a lesser violence.” And we can understand the source of this appeal. For if we are on board with the Derridean project, we have to give up decision procedures and substantive normative claims. But in doing so we are open to the charge, so often made, of relativism, nihilism, sophistry, and so on. Promoting the idea of choosing a lesser violence is one way of saving Derrida, and ourselves, from these accusations. It doesn’t turn Derrida into Kant, but it does restore some ethical respectability to his work.<sup>15</sup>

The problem, however, with a Derrida “saved” in this way is that it just does not fit with the implications of overwhelming majority of his writings on violence. There is no choice that can be made to guarantee a reduction in violence. And no guarantee is no guarantee—a question of degree just does not simply make sense in this context.<sup>16</sup> Now there is one point in favor of

these interpretations. This is that while Derrida turns away from the language of choosing a lesser violence, he does promote the use of certain notions over others, and this might be seen to be linked to considerations of a greater or lesser violence. For example, in an interview from 1989 Derrida justifies his choice of the word democracy in the notion of ‘democracy to come’ by claiming that this choice is “the least lousy possible” (“Politics and Friendship” 181). He then goes on to argue that what is most important here is the “to come,” and draws a contrast with “nondemocratic systems [which] are above all systems that *close* and *close themselves off* from this coming of the other... In the end and beyond all the classical critique of fascist, Nazi, and totalitarian violence in general, one can say that these are systems that close the ‘to come’ and that close themselves into the presentation of the presentable” (182). This separation of democracy to come from totalitarianism suggests that it might be possible, by keeping oneself open, to shield oneself from the latter’s more horrific consequences.

A similar contrast is drawn in the later interview “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides.” This time addressing a certain kind of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism, Derrida states:

What appears to me unacceptable in the “strategy”... of the “bin Laden effect” is not only the cruelty, the disregard for human life, the disrespect for law, for women, the use of what is worst in technocapitalist modernity for the purposes of religious fanaticism. No, it is, above all, the fact that such actions and such discourse *open onto no future and, in my view, have no future*... Nothing of what has been so laboriously secularized in the forms of the “political,” of “democracy,” of “international law,” and even in the nontheological form of sovereignty... none of this seems to have any place whatsoever in the discourse

“bin Laden.” That is why, in this unleashing of violence without name, if I had to take one of the two sides and choose in a binary situation, well, I would. (“Autoimmunity” 113)

This passage too suggests a separation, this time between what has been secularized, under many names including “democracy,” which would open out onto some kind of future, and a fundamentalism that does not do this. Faced with these two options, Derrida is clear in his choice.

One could claim that these passages are evidence of Derrida retaining the choice for a lesser violence in his oeuvre, and that one is thus right to retain this particular normative injunction as an integral part of Derridean analysis. Against this interpretation, I have two responses, one stronger than the other. The weaker response is to point out that in moments such as these, where Derrida opposes democracy or democracy to come—both seen as open to the future—against phenomena that close themselves to all futures, he never explicitly aligns one side of the opposition with a lesser violence. So even while it is clear which side Derrida chooses, and that the other side harbors violent possibilities, we cannot conclude that Derrida’s choice is made according to a calculus of the lesser violence. Absent any explicit statement concerning a lesser violence, it would thereby be wrong to see an implicit one at work, especially in the light of the other analyses of violence that I have discussed. Even in these moments, the choice Derrida makes would thus not one of a lesser violence.

The second, stronger response is to accept that Derrida is here implying that one can make a distinction between a greater and lesser violence along the lines of degrees of closure (and the “violence without name” in the above citation supports this interpretation), but argue

that he is wrong to do so. This is because the fundamental distinction at work in these citations between a position that would keep the future open, and one that would close it off, cannot be maintained. One cannot so easily distinguish democracy or democracy to come on the one hand, from fascism, totalitarianism, or religious fundamentalism on the other. And the justification for this response comes from Derrida's own work. In *Rogues*, as well as in the interview just cited, Derrida argues at length that democracy operates according to a logic of autoimmunity. In particular, he analyzes two distinct phenomena, the coming into power of non-democratic governments through democratic elections, and the attacks of September 11. Derrida writes that the first is a possibility always present in democracy: "the *alternative to democracy* can always be *represented* as a democratic *alternation*" (*Rogues* 31). After evoking the suspension of elections in Algeria in 1992 as an example of this threat and the responses it may provoke, Derrida then states that "there is something paradigmatic in this autoimmune suicide: fascist and Nazi totalitarianisms came into power or ascended into power through formally normal and formally democratic electoral processes" (33). This statement inscribes totalitarianism as a possibility arising out of democracy, precisely because the latter operates according to an autoimmune logic. Similarly, Derrida points out that those who attacked the World Trade Center "were trained on the sovereign soil of the United States, under the nose of the CIA and the FBI, perhaps not without some autoimmune consent on the part of an administration with at once more and less foresight than one tends to think" (40). Again, the move is to argue that democracy's supposed opposite, here those who would be grouped under the "bin Laden effect" mentioned above, arise as a possibility from with democracy itself.

These analyses undermine the distinction Derrida makes between democracy and its others according to an openness or closure to the future. Not only do they show how the one

arises out of the other, they also fit precisely with Derrida's overall understanding of violence, which implies that to be open to the future in the way he advocates, that is, to embrace a democracy to come, offers no guarantee that one thereby avoids what appears under the sign of the worst. Derrida is thus wrong to claim that these other positions—those of totalitarianism and fundamentalism—have no future. In their relationship to democracy, or to democracy to come, these supposed others share in the future. And how could it be otherwise? How could we be so sure of the future to know that certain ideologies have no part of it? If the seemingly best can lead to the worst, why cannot the worst invert into something better? By what right could we claim this latter possibility as impossible?<sup>17</sup>

To point this out is not to argue that Derrida, or any of us, should thereby embrace totalitarianism or fundamentalism, in the hope that it will produce a more peaceful world. Rather, it is to caution against thinking that if we have such a hope we could ever rest easy, regardless of the regime or ideology we favor. So when Derrida claims that the word democracy is the “least lousy possible,” his choice to use it cannot be justified through aligning the “least lousy” with a “lesser violence.” It may very well be that a democracy to come will side with a greater violence. Democracy to come, whatever its merits, remains implicated in violence. Perhaps greater, perhaps lesser, but this “perhaps” is no more or less certain than with democracies that are already here, or even than with their darker, nondemocratic cousins.<sup>18</sup>

What this shows, I would suggest, is the radicality of Derrida's understanding of the relationship between politics, ethics, and violence. Derrida's analyses imply that politics is always implicated in violence, and that one might even find oneself advocating a greater violence in the pursuit of political ends. This is inevitable from a Derridean point of view, for there is simply no way we could choose a path that is guaranteed to lead to a lesser violence in

political action. Now one could perhaps accept this, yet hold onto the hope that a calculus of lesser violence remains possible in the sphere of ethics. This would be to accept a greater violence as inevitable in politics, a claim that is in fact consistent with a long tradition in political thinking, and judge it thereby unethical. But this position too is inconsistent with Derrida's analyses. First because there are many resources within Derrida's oeuvre for challenging the separation of politics and ethics. But also because, as we have seen, his writings leave no space for the choice of a lesser violence, even within ethics. An ethics based on openness must be open to all possibilities, for better or for worse, always.

Thus, to return to the theme with which I began, Derrida's work involves neither a belated turning towards ethical and political concerns, as his critics would suggest, nor a complete absence of turning, as is sometimes said in his defense, even by Derrida himself. Rather, we have seen at least two movements at work that can be related to this figure. First, there is the continual turning over of the theme of violence, the circular motion that would characterize Derrida's constant engagement with this theme, and the constancy of the tools he deployed in this engagement. Such a turning is not just the return of the same, with Derrida simply repeating what he has said before. The genealogy of violence traced in this essay shows a continual development and complexification of Derrida's early remarks on violence, particularly those from *Of Grammatology*, an increasing sophistication in his attempts to come to terms with the violence at work in so many different contexts. Derrida's tour of the theme of violence thus follows the turns of an iteration, not a repetition. Second, there is a turn in Derrida's move away from the idea of choosing a lesser violence. In "Violence and Metaphysics" Derrida challenges the connection between ethics and peace, while he at the same time holds onto the hope that we might nonetheless make choices to reduce the degree of the inevitable violence of light. This

claim, however, is quickly abandoned, and Derrida is right to do so. For this choice of a lesser violence is inconsistent with the implications of his more expansive analyses of violence which place us in a position of fundamental ignorance with respect to the future, and so the worst is always possible in anything we choose. This turn poses, I would suggest, a real challenge to our understanding of these issues, for it shakes up any easy relation we might hold between politics and ethics on the one hand, and considerations of violence on the other.

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<sup>2</sup> There are obviously important differences between issues named “ethical” and those named “political,” so one should be careful not to conflate the two. At the same time, much of Derrida’s later work challenges any clean separation between ethics and politics (see, for example, the analysis in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*). Even while the focus of my essay is violence, something relevant to both ethics and politics, a close examination of the relations, similarities, and differences between these two domains is not central to my argument, and so I will leave discussion of this aside.

<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I will not interrogate the accuracy of Derrida’s interpretation of Levinas. Similar questions can be raised in all of the readings I trace in this paper, but I am less concerned with this issue than with the claims that Derrida makes on the basis of these readings – my aim is to articulate the more or less positive account of violence that Derrida gives in his own name through his engagements with other thinkers.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the last citation, in this passage Alan Bass translates “*la moindre violence*” as “the least violence.” We can understand his reason for doing so, since here there is an implicit contrast drawn between “*la moindre violence*” and “*la pire violence*,” (translated as “the worst violence”), while in the earlier passage it was opposed to “*une violence pire*” (“a worse violence”), suggesting “the lesser violence” as more appropriate there. I would argue, however, that the difference between “the lesser violence” and “the least violence” is not significant in these cases, since the latter should not be understood in some absolute sense, but rather as “least” in comparison to the other alternative, namely the worst violence. “*La moindre violence*” can thus be translated as “the lesser violence” in this passage, which I have done.

Later in “Violence and Metaphysics” Derrida makes a statement similar to that just cited: “Discourse, therefore, if it is originally violent, can only *do violence to itself*, can only negate itself in order to affirm itself, make war upon the war which institutes it without ever *being able* to reappropriate to itself this negativity, to the extent that it is discourse. *Necessarily* without reappropriating it, for if it did so, the horizon of peace would disappear into the night (worst violence as previolence). This secondary war, as the avowal of violence, is the least possible violence [*la moindre violence possible*], the only way to repress the worst violence, the violence of primitive and prelogical silence, of an unimaginable night which would not even be the opposite of day, an absolute violence which would not even be the opposite of nonviolence: nothingness or pure non-sense” (130). Here “*la moindre violence possible*” must be translated as “the least possible violence,” but I would again maintain that Derrida is making a comparison between the violence of the “secondary war,” which is less violent than the “worst violence.”

<sup>5</sup> Another trace of Derrida’s engagement with Levinas in the reading of Lévi-Strauss is the close resemblance between the “originary violence” that I discuss in this section with the earlier essay’s “transcendental violence” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 118-33). Beyond these formal similarities, *Of Grammatology* also gestures towards “Violence and Metaphysics” in claiming that “recognizing in a language the other as pure other... is the death of the pure idiom reserved for the unique” (110), and in naming “the nonethical opening of ethics. A violent opening” (140).

<sup>6</sup> There is some ambiguity on this point, since Derrida also notes that Benjamin, at times, seems to be arguing for precisely the kind of necessary contamination that he is proposing (281, 290).

<sup>7</sup> For reasons of brevity I have avoided engagement with secondary literature in presenting Derrida’s analyses of violence in the first half of my essay. In the context of my present discussion, however, it is worth mentioning John P. McCormick’s “Derrida on Law; or, Poststructuralism gets Serious.” McCormick provides a careful and patient reading of “Force of Law” that is particularly illuminating in underlying parallels between the way Derrida situates himself in this essay and the position of Socrates. But when examining Derrida’s reading of Benjamin, McCormick

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places the former on the side of divine violence, suggesting that he accepts Benjamin's description of this as nonviolent. In his "Transcending Violence in Derrida: A Response to John McCormick," Ben Corson opposes McCormick on this point by appealing to "Violence and Metaphysics" and *Of Grammatology*, arguing that there is a continuity across Derrida's writings in his resistance to the possibility of peace (a claim McCormick explicitly rejects in "Justice, Interpretation, and Violence: A Rejoinder to Corson" 880). I am thus in agreement with Corson's view, in that I am arguing that Derrida remains critical of the aspiration for a pure non-violence. Where I differ from Corson (and again from McCormick) is in his claim that Derrida's work points to a way to minimize violence ("Transcending Violence in Derrida" 872). I argue against the coherence of this claim in the second half of my essay.

<sup>8</sup> The violence of the proper name is also thematized in "Force of Law" in the way Derrida tracks the self-effacing of Benjamin's text: this "dismaying trajectory, one that is aporetic but also productive of strange events in its very aporia, a kind of self-destruction, if not a suicide of the text, that lets no other legacy appear than the violence of its signature—as divine signature" (262). There is thus a violence that the text does to itself, leaving behind only the divine signature, which in its turn is also linked to violence. We will see this self-aggression return in a moment under the name of the death drive.

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," trans. P.A. Brault and M. Naas, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. G. Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. P.A. Brault and M. Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> As Derrida states in a later analysis of the autoimmunity in reason, "Why speak in this way of *autoimmunity*?... In order to situate the question of life and of the living being, of life and death, of life-death, at the heart of my remarks" (*Rogues* 123).

<sup>11</sup> Also, the formula summarizing the violence of the One in *Archive Fever* reappears in "Faith and Knowledge" in an altered form: "At the bottom without bottom of this **crypt**, the One + n incalculably engenders all these supplements. *It makes violence of itself, does violence to itself and keeps itself from the other* [Il se fait violence et se garde de l'autre]. The auto-immunity of religion can only indemnify itself without assignable end" (100). This formula is stated in partial form in "Violence and Metaphysics" in a passage I cited above, although Derrida does not reflect at length on its significance: "Discourse, therefore, if it is originally violent, can only *do violence to itself* [se faire violence], can only negate itself in order to affirm itself, make war upon the war which institutes it without ever *being able* to reappropriate this negativity, to the extent that it is discourse" (130). It is also used in *Politics of Friendship*: "At the centre of the principle, always, the One does violence to itself, and guards itself against the other [Au principe, toujours, l'Un se fait violence et se garde de l'autre]" (ix), and "the One divides and opposes itself, opposes itself by posing itself, represses and violates the difference it carries within itself, wages war, *wages war on itself, itself becoming war* [se fait la guerre], *frightens itself, itself becoming fear* [se fait peur], and *does violence to itself, itself becoming violence* [se fait violence], transforms itself into frightened violence in guarding itself from the other, for *it guards itself from, and in, the other* [il se garde de l'autre], always, Him, the One, the One 'different from itself'" (109 n.13).

<sup>12</sup> See also *Prayers and Tears* xxi: "[Deconstruction] repeats the passion for the messianic promise and messianic expectation, *sans* the concrete messianisms of the positive religions that wage endless war and spill the blood of the other, and that, anointing themselves God's chosen people, are consummately dangerous to everyone else who is not so chosen; it ceaselessly repeats the *veins*, the apocalyptic call for the impossible, but without calling for the apocalypse that would consume its enemies in fire and damnation; it repeats the work of circumcision as the cut that opens the same to the other *sans* sectarian closure; it repeats Abraham's trek up to Moriah and makes a gift without return of Isaac, *sans* the economy of blood sacrifice".

<sup>13</sup> For a similar concession with respect to the affirmation of the *tout autre*, see *Prayers and Tears* 349 n.9: "There is nothing to say that, under the name of the *tout autre*, we may not be revisited by the worst. The 'new order' of the Nazis, the right-wing triumphalism of the 'new world order,' and the right-wing extremists who were swept into office in the elections of 1994 in the United States all parade their reactionary programs under the name of something radically new, of the *tout autre*... Indeed, even 'yes, yes' can be turned to violence."

<sup>14</sup> In his book *The Promise of Memory*, Fritsch returns to the question of violence in Derrida's work, and provides a more sophisticated and comprehensive account that is framed by its intersection with Marxist and Benjaminian themes. I cannot hope to do justice to this work here, but my suspicion is that it contains a similar instability concerning the appropriateness of a lesser violence in the Derridean position. Fritsch proposes, at the end of the book, a "productive oscillation [that] moves between an originary violence and the unnecessary, redressable violence of foreclosure and exclusion that fortifies presently unjust institutions" (*The Promise of Memory* 188). But

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again, the question is how one might determine which violence is unnecessary. It seems that insofar as Fritsch agrees with the Derridean critique of Benjamin questioning the latter's confidence in being able to identify victims in history who would not be implicated in violence, the resources for doing so must come from within Derrida's own account. And while Fritsch does not at this precise moment appeal to a politics of a lesser violence as one such resource, he does mention it in passing with approval at other times in the text (pp. 144, 151, 182). This approval would suggest that this notion might be expected to do this work of differentiation between necessary and unnecessary violence. However, against this, Fritsch also reiterates the claims made in the democracy essay that Derrida's position is insufficient "on strictly normative grounds," appealing both to Ernesto Laclau and his own essay to claim that "if constitutive openness has to be affirmed as it makes subjects possible, no ethical injunction to cultivate that openness follows without further arguments of a normative kind" (190). This would, for the reasons outlined above, preclude recourse to Derrida's remarks on a lesser violence as a way of negotiating the oscillation Fritsch promotes.

<sup>15</sup> An alternative approach to the question of lesser violence in Derrida's work is made by Martin Hägglund in his essay "The Necessity of Discrimination." In the course of arguing forcefully against the Levinasian interpretations that would align a Derrida's understanding of justice with peace, Hägglund opposes the view that "the desire for a lesser violence answers to a normative ideal or that it is inherently good," and asserts that "deconstruction cannot teach us what the 'lesser violence is in any given case'" ("The Necessity of Discrimination" 48). On this score, I am in agreement with Hägglund, and indeed am indebted to his analysis. However, while I am arguing for this very reason that the notion of a "lesser violence" is redundant, Hägglund argues for its retention, claiming that it is a useful in characterizing the struggle for justice within the Derridean framework. He bases this on the claim that "all decisions made in the name of justice are made in view of what is judged to be the lesser violence" (48). Derrida's vocabulary of choosing a lesser violence in "Violence and Metaphysics" would thus presumably be a description of this fact about all decisions made in the name of justice. While Hägglund does not develop this at length, I have my doubts about its plausibility, since it is unclear to me that all claims to justice are in fact made in the name of a lesser violence. A system of justice based on retribution observing strict equality in the measurement of punishment vis-à-vis the crime, for example, would seem to be an economy of violence without ever needing to appeal to the concept of a *lesser* violence.

<sup>16</sup> In his essay "Derrida and Politics" Geoffrey Bennington cites one of the phrases from "Violence and Metaphysics" on a lesser violence, calling it "something like a categorical imperative" (*Interrupting Derrida* 28). This citation is not made unthinkingly, as the accompanying footnote shows: "It must be said that this is a misleading formulation if it implies a simple one-dimensional scale stretching between 'violence' and 'non-violence', and a relatively simple calculation as to where the 'lesser violence' lies. In the light of what we have said about the structure of decision, it follows that any decision made in the name of the 'lesser violence' *always might* be the most violent decision – this radical thought of violence necessarily implies that the violence inherent in decision cannot simply be calculated in advance as the more or less violent" (201 n.29). Certainly. But does this mean that a non-simple calculation can be made in advance regarding a lesser violence? What might this look like? And if not (which is what I am arguing we have to admit), then why retain this formula at all? For a shorter but almost identical disclaimer, see *Interrupting Derrida* 206 n.21.

<sup>17</sup> In a related vein, there is one occasion of which I know that Derrida alludes to non-violence as a possibility. In an improvised statement responding to Ernesto Laclau, Derrida states that "I think that there is, in the opening of a context of argumentation and discussion, a reference – unknown, indeterminate, but none the less thinkable – to disarmament. I agree that such disarmament is never simply present, even in the most pacific moment of persuasion, and therefore that a certain force and violence is irreducible, but nonetheless this violence can only be practiced and can only appear as such on the basis of a non-violence, a vulnerability, an exposition. I do not believe in non-violence as a descriptive and determinable experience, but rather as an irreducible promise and of the relation to the other as essentially non-instrumental. This is not the dream of a beatifically pacific relation, but of a certain experience of friendship perhaps unthinkable today and unthought within the historical determination of friendship in the West. This is a friendship, what I sometimes call an *aimance*, that excludes violence; a non-appropriative relation to the other that occurs without violence and on the basis of which all violence detaches itself and on the basis of which all violence detaches itself and is determined." ("Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism" 83). On the face of it, this statement would seem to contradict the claims I have been making throughout this paper (which, I have argued, are Derrida's claims). Again, one is confronted with a choice to be made in interpretation. One option is to attempt to interpret this passage so as to render it consistent with the rest of Derrida's oeuvre. However, I would resist this, and maintain that it is in fact inconsistent with what Derrida says everywhere else with

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respect to violence, and for this very reason argue that he is mistaken making this claim. It is not the case that such a notion of non-violence is thinkable, as Derrida's analyses of violence make abundantly clear.

<sup>18</sup> If Derrida's affirmation of democracy is not made on the grounds of a lesser violence, one might then well ask just what it is that justifies his claim of it being the least lousy name for the political interventions he seeks to make. One answer is given in *Rogues* when Derrida claims that "the expression 'democracy to come' takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility" (86-87). This suggests that Derrida values democracy for its intrinsic capacity for and valuing of self-transformation. Note, however, that in speaking of this Derrida never aligns it with a lesser violence.