

DECONSTRUCTION, ETHICS AND ISLAM*

BY

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Abstract

A criticism of all totalizing knowledge, deconstruction rejects all appeals to ontological, epistemological or ethical absolutes as a metaphysics of presence. Like all postmodernist philosophies, it presents serious difficulties for traditional monotheistic theologies and their basic affirmations about the human subject. Some are apprehensive of the atheistic tendencies of deconstruction, but others have enthusiastically argued for the possibility of a theistic appropriation of postmodern themes and their hermeneutics of suspicion and finitude. This article provides an outline of the ethico-theroretical basis of deconstruction, and examines its ethical claims. Derrida's views on Islam as reflected in his discourse on hospitality are examined, and a critical evaluation of the ethical propositions of deconstruction from an Islamic perspective is presented.

As repeatedly stated by Jacques Derrida, the aim of deconstruction is "to overthrow the hierarchy" of dualism and the violent binary system of oppositions which is at the foundation of philosophy (*Positions*, 41). To deconstruct, Derrida says, is to reverse logocentrism,¹ to displace the metaphysics of presence, and to overturn the "imperialism of the *logos*." Most importantly, the goal of deconstruction is to make an end to the privileging of the voice and the repression of writing, which pervade the Western philosophical discourse (*Positions*, 12 and 34; *Dissemination*, 6). This reduction of writing to the exteriority of the

* This article was written before the regrettable passing away of J. Derrida.

¹ According to Derrida, phonocentrism is the granting of temporal and logical priority to the spoken word over its written representation. Logocentrism, which is also phonocentrism, is a privileging of the spoken word, which is based on a belief in the unmediated presence of object signified. "All the metaphysical determinations of truth . . . are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the *logos*, or of reason thought within the lineage of the *logos*, in whatever sense it is understood," be it philosophical, theological, or anthropological. Within this lineage, the link to the *phoné* is so essential "that logocentrism . . . is also phonocentrism." See *Of Grammatology* (hereafter *OG*), 10-11. For related meanings of logocentrism, see Ellis (1989, 31).





signifier, this “phonologism, Derrida says, is less a consequence of the practice of the alphabet in a given culture than a certain ethical or axiological *experience* of this practice” (*Positions*, 25). For Derrida, the hierarchical dualism that characterizes the Western philosophy is simply the result of the “ethico-political grounds” of this discourse. Indeed, as Rodolphe Gasché has indicated, in his gravamen against Husserl and the Western philosophical discourse over the issue of presence and its relation to voice, Derrida was less concerned with the logical coherence, or the empirical considerations of that discourse, than with the ethico-theroretical decisions that are behind the Western philosophy in general (Gasché, 1994, 36-37; see also Bennington, 2000, 8).

Many are those who think that deconstruction “is a species of nihilistic textual free play which suspends all questions of value and is therefore . . . immoral”, but not Simon Critchley, who believes that deconstruction is ethical, and that deconstructive reading is an ethical demand, a responsibility (Critchley, 1992, 3). Critchley does not contend that an ethics such as the Kantian deontology and its basis in respect, or the Heideggerian letting be, can be derived from deconstruction. What ‘is’ ethical, Critchley maintains, is that “the pattern of reading produced in deconstruction . . . has an ethical structure”, and that deconstruction takes place ethically. Another believer in the ethicality of deconstruction is Geoffrey Bennington. But Bennington is far from the naive perception of deconstruction as “more or less straightforwardly ethical, as though the burden of deconstruction consisted in delivering us from metaphysical illusion into clear light of ethical felicity and self-righteousness” (Bennington, 2000, 34). In fact, Bennington says, ethics is for deconstruction just another totalizing concept which has to be deconstructed. The question for him is “can there still be ethics while deconstruction deconstructs ethics?” Here he thinks that something arch-ethical does survive deconstruction. Even more, he thinks that “deconstruction might after all be describable as ethical, and perhaps as ethics itself” (Id., 35).

Indeed Derrida does have a great interest in ethics, but this interest is mostly limited to his work on Levinas’s writing on the subject, which is evident in both “Violence and Metaphysics” (in *Writing and Difference*, hereafter *WD*), and in “Hospitality” (in *Acts of Religion*). What determines Derrida’s ethical views, as well as those of Levinas, is a rejection of both Husserl’s phenomenology and Heidegger’s hermeneutics as ontologically inadequate for the requirements of ethics. But Derrida’s ethics also reflects a Nietzschean influence, especially in respect

to the eternal recurrence, which characterizes the messianic turn of deconstruction.²

One of the early philosophical works of Derrida is *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (hereafter *The Introduction*), where he offered his interpretation of Husserl's phenomenological view of genesis, or the origin of the world (knowledge). Husserl rejected the view of critical philosophy and its emphasis on epistemology, as well as the speculative metaphysics, which sought the origin of the world in terms of cause or principle. To bridge the ontic gap between consciousness and the world, Husserl resorted to reduction and conceived of transcendental subjectivity as extra-mundane, but without being otherworldly. Opened by *epoché* into a horizontal immanence, transcendental subjectivity is both the source of constitution and the constituted object in the life-world.³ That is, Husserl's phenomenology is an egology, the study of the self and its self-constitution along with the other (Zahawi, 2003, 118). As Husserl indicated in *Ideas* § 55, reality and world are the result of the "*unities of meaning . . . related to certain organizations of pure and absolute consciousness which dispense meaning and show forth its validity in certain essentially fixed, specific way*". Or, as Ricoeur (1984, 92) put it, the ego is a "monad which concretely develops the sense of the world for itself."

² An excellent narrative of Derrida's formative period that led to the inauguration of deconstruction and its various phases is provided in Lawlor's book *Derrida and Husserl. The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* with much details and lucidity. According to Lawlor, Derrida was initially preoccupied with the question genesis, which he resolved dialectically. He then appropriated the ethical concepts of Levinas as well as his messianic eschatology, and the ethical question became that of the keeping of the promise. In *Speech and Phenomenology*, genesis gave way to the sign, and deconstruction was developed to displace the metaphysics of presence. In *The Specters of Marx*, the ethical concepts of Derrida underwent yet another turn, a hauntological turn. This is a move in which the trace was conceptually transformed into a "revenant," a "ghost." It is also a move in which deconstruction was no longer about the answering of the question posed within metaphysics, but how to keep the promise to a specter (Lawlor, 2002, especially 226-234; also the essay by Critchley on *The Specters of Marx* in *Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*, London, New York, Verso).

³ Phenomenology studies phenomena as they are presented to consciousness in order to account for the total horizon (or limits) of our lived-experience, the only world before us. To achieve a presuppositionless awareness, Husserl's phenomenology proceeds through *epoché*, which is the bracketing or suspension of beliefs and judgment as to the existence or inexistence of objects. In addition to this phenomenological reduction, there is also an eidetic reduction, where objects are thematically reduced to their generalities and essences.



In *The Introduction*, as well as in “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology”, Derrida rejected Husserl’s phenomenology as *logos* or reason that produces itself in history, appears to itself, “and calls to itself as *telos*, and whose *dynamis* tends towards its *energeia* or *entelechia*” (*WD*, 166; *Introduction*, 145-156; also Lawlor, 2002, 26-27). Derrida also found Husserl’s phenomenology riddled with paradoxes, especially with regard to communication and outward expression.⁴ To deal with these issues, as well as the conflicting transcendental and empirical interpretations of phenomenology,⁵ Derrida developed an “originary dialectic” of existence and essence that is transcendental but includes an empirical, or a real moment. Combining Husserl’s phenomenology and Heidegger’s ontology, he agreed with Eugen Fink that the origin of the world is transcendental, that is, non-mundane and non-existent. But, in addition to being non-mundane and non-existent, Derrida also thought that the origin of the world is always non-present and non-sense (Lawlor, 2002, 21-22). Derrida reasoned that, because intuition (Husserl’s *principle of principles*) is always finite, and evidence is always given in person, an origin is never determined by the presence of sense. There is only non-presence. But this non-presence is not a negative absence. It simply means that the origin is given in the world, but, of necessity, it does not appear as such. The originary absolute, which is neither an opposition nor an antinomy or a duality, can only appear otherwise. In *Speech and Phenomena* (hereafter *SP*), this quasi-transcendental disclosure was given the name *différance* (*SP*, 63, and 82; Lawlor, 2002, 185).

It is also at this juncture that Derrida’s thinking meets that of Levinas, whose ethical focus is on subjectivity and alterity. Levinas believes that the world belongs to subjectivity but subjectivity does not belong to the world. Being-in-the-world does not define the essence of subjectivity, which is inwardness, recollection, and excrescence out of the world (Levinas, 1998, XIII). Subjectivity also involves a transcendence or a movement toward an alterity that is beyond the eternity of the things

⁴ These include the problem of expression/indication ambiguity discussed in *Speech and Phenomena*, Chapter 3; and in *Margins*, 155-173; and also solipsism, which is discussed in, e.g., Ricoeur, 1984, 62; Zahavi, 2003, 109, and Kelly, 1994, esp. the Introduction.

⁵ E.g., the interpretations of Tran-Duc-Thao and Jean Cavailles, who, along with Eugen Fink and Merleau-Ponty, are frequently cited by Derrida in *The Introduction* (e.g., notes 60, 88; 89; and 171, n. 178). See also Lawlor, (2002, 46-67), who devotes a whole chapter to these two relatively obscure authors. For Fink’s relation to Husserl, see the introduction of Ronald Bruzina to Fink (1988).



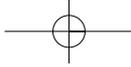
of the world. Being “an exteriority which can be neither derived, nor constituted on the basis of anything other than itself” (*WD*, 106), alterity is an indefinite horizon that, like the Cartesian idea of infinity, overflows the mind that conceives it (Levinas, 1998, XV). In its relation to the other (*l'Autre, to heteron*), the ego is the Same (Critchley, 1992, 4-5), but subjectivity is a heteronomy, not autonomy, for it is by virtue of the other that subjectivity is realized (see Llewelyn, 2002, 4).

This subjectivity which is an intentionality reaching out to, but which is also constitutive of the other, is an ecstatic moment that is experienced in the face, in speech, and even in eroticism.⁶ In its emphasis on speech and the radical separation and exteriority of the other, Levinas's metaphysics distinguishes between the Saying and the Said, where the good is beyond being (Critchley, 1992, 8, 17; 1999, 75). As a face, the other is glanced and encountered but “Without intermediary and without communion” (*WD*, 90). The other⁷ is there to be answered, and speech is the imperative and vocative force that structures the ego as it is modified by the presence of the other. This response is a pre-thematic, pre-objective relationship, *savage* and uncultured, operating under a predicative logic *avant la lettre*, and subtended by an engagement in the practical world. Ontologically, it is a relationship with a non-representational clearing, within which the call of alterity, its protests, and its threats, are ethical in nature. Theologically, it is the Biblical response “Lo, here I am!” “*heneini*” (Gen. 22:1, 7, 11; Llewelyn, 2002, 18).

In taking this philosophical path, Levinas was aiming to displace the traditional sense of ethics by redefining metaphysics. On the one hand, Levinas thought that Husserl neutralized the infinite alterity of the other, reducing it in *Cartesian Meditations* to the same; that is, the other was constituted by analogical apperceptions into a transcendental ego, which is not a real, living ego, facing me and talking to me (*WD*, 123). On the other hand, Levinas also thought Heidegger's ontology is but an

⁶ In Levinas's logic, where the sensibility and proximity to the other is based on substitution, the subject is constituted as a subject of persecution, and ethics is envisioned as a trauma, a self-flagellation, a masochism, where one is responsible for his or her own persecution. Self-relation is also experienced as a lack (Critchley, 1999, 189).

⁷ In Levinas's talk, the Other means other people as well as God (Llewelyn, 2002, 9). But the problem as Derrida has pointed out, is that Levinas cannot coherently keep the distinction between the infinite alterity of God and the other equally infinite alterity of every human, or of the other in general (*Gift of Death*, 83-84).

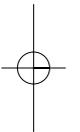
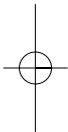


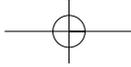
absolute sameness, “a violent totality,” lacking respect and regard for the other. For Levinas, any harmony or coherence between ontology and being is a luminous identity, and is therefore a violence of light, a theoreticism, and a “technico-political oppression” (*WD*, 89-90, 116, n. 42). Levinas, therefore, rejected both phenomenology and ontology as philosophies of violence, “Incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other” (*Id.*, 91). To affirm the priority of Being over the existent is, for Levinas, to neutralize the other, to create asymmetry and injustice, and to subordinate justice to freedom.

Derrida recognized the importance of language to Levinas’s philosophical and ethical views. He understood that, for Levinas, the other is exhausted in speech, and that both metaphysics and ethics are but a discourse of alterity (*Id.*, 148). He saw clearly how Levinas equated the possibility of metaphysics with the possibility of speech, and the metaphysical responsibility with the responsibility for language (*Id.*, 116). Derrida also understood that, where Heidegger reduced metaphysics to ontology, Levinas raised it above being, and where Heidegger lowered the importance of ethics in relation to being, Levinas made the experience of the other the sole opening to metaphysics (Lawlor, 2002, 147). Derrida then appropriated Levinas’s criticism of Husserl and Heidegger, but not without a criticism of his own. Derrida’s criticism of Levinas centered around two points, language and empiricism (*WD*, 108).

The haunting reality facing deconstruction, Derrida says, is that the only language available to it is the language of philosophy, or the double bind of logocentrism. This is why, he said, hard as Levinas may have tried, his ethics never succeeded in overcoming the totalizing ontologies it stood against, and remained dependent on Husserl’s phenomenology, Heidegger’s hermeneutics, and Hegel’s dialectic. Derrida did take note of Levinas’s attempt to brake away from the Parmenidesan tradition of totalitarian unity, an act which he qualified as a second parricide in reference to the first parricide of the Sophists’ “laying of unfilial hands” (*Sophist*, 241d; *Dissemination*, 164; *WD*, 86-89). But a question remained as to whether a non-Greek (Levinas is a Lithuanian Jew who migrated to France in the early twentieth century) can succeed in doing what the Greeks could not do, except by posing as Greek who speaks Greek. Levinas’s metaphysics must be taken by the Greek *logos*, Derrida concluded (*WD*, 152; Critchley, 1992, 13).

Derrida also criticized Levinas for his amalgamation of empiricism and phenomenology. As indicated above (note 3), in its insistence on essence, phenomenological reduction excludes all facts and presupposi-





tions about the world, but Levinas's metaphysics of the other folds on itself, reaching to the living world to find the face of the other, and that of God (*WD*, 108).

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In searching for an answer to the “unheard-of question”⁸ and redefining metaphysics, Derrida, just like Levinas, attempted to amalgamate Jewish genetic thought of transcendence of the other with the Greek structuralist thought of the immanence of the same (Lawlor, 2002, 145-146). But redefining metaphysics, for Derrida, meant something more. In addition to rejecting Husserl's phenomenology as a metaphysics of presence, and criticizing Heidegger's ontology as a pursuit of the origin of philosophy in pre-Platonic Greek thought, the redefinition of metaphysics, for Derrida, meant reversing the hierarchy of concepts and signs, a hierarchy in which writing has been metaphysically ‘secondarized’ and repressed.

Derrida's stress on the sign is articulated in *Speech and Phenomenology*, and in *Of Grammatology*, the two major works where deconstruction was developed to displace the metaphysics of presence and to bring phenomenology and ontology to an end. The stress on the written sign, also led to the redefinition of ethics in terms of text. Indeed, Derrida conceived of ethics, in general, as a relationship to a particular text, or readability. Not only do texts define existence⁹ but they also determine its content. As he said in *Specters of Marx* (hereafter *SM*), “To be . . . means . . . to inherit,” and “the being of what we are is first of all inheritance” (*SM*, 54).

This relationship to the text, or reading-as-inheritance, is a matter of negotiation, and of choosing what to reaffirm in the inheritance and

⁸ This is the ontological question which, as Heidegger put it in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1, is: “Why is there something (anything at all), rather than nothing?” This question, which Husserl never asked, became for Derrida a question of language, the unheard-of graphics, and the unheard-of *morphe* (*WD*, 111; *Margins*, 172, n. 16). It is a question of the origin of philosophy itself, but, for Derrida, it is also a question of the promise. As he put it in *Speech and Phenomena*, the unheard-of question opens upon a horizon beyond absolute knowledge and its ethical, aesthetic, or religious system. Yet, it is not non-knowledge; it is knowledge yet to come. “Such a question will legitimately be understood as *meaning* nothing, as no longer belonging to the system of meaning” (*SP*, 102-103, italics original; also *WD*, 80-81; *OG*, 23).

⁹ As stated in *Of Grammatology*, “there is nothing outside the text,” and “there is no outside-text.” (*OG*, 163).





in the tradition presented by the text. But reading-as-inheritance is also an asymmetrical relationship, in which the other, the absolutely other, the ultimate indecipherable, exceeds the text. In this asymmetrical relationship, one's obligation is to be inventive, a task which exceeds the standard of duty under a Kantian system of ethics. Under the requirement of inventiveness, acts come not *from* duty, but *out of* duty, meaning that acts are held beyond what the ordinary sense of duty might prescribe (Bennington, 2000, 37). When sight and vision are brought into this graphic world, Derrida's textual discourse assumes a spectral tone, and, as indicated in *Gift of Death* (27, 75), the dissymmetry becomes a relationship between the individual and the unseen gaze of the other that remains secret yet still commands.¹⁰ The "gaze that sees me without my seeing it looking at me," also comes in the hauntological form of a silhouette (*Gift of Death*, 75, 91), or in the form of death "the figure of visitation without invitation or of haunting well- or ill-come . . . [*la hantise bien ou malvenue*]" (*Acts of Religion*, 360, *SM*, 10).

Reading-as-inheritance is an ethical relation where the other's transcendence is encountered, welcomed and answered to. And just as Levinas located the possibility of justice in the other, so too, Derrida attached both justice and responsibility to a third party (*un troisième*), which he also called substitution. Reflecting the structure of *différance*, this originary presence of a third party is the trace, the third term in a dialectical relationship. This third party, which haunts the face-to-face relation with the other, appears to contaminate the purity of the ethical relation, but it is precisely this contamination which Derrida seeks as the condition of possibility of ethics (Bennington, 2000, 40). In Derrida's logic of *différance*, there is nothing separating the dialectical from the non-dialectical, the transcendental from the mundane (Lawlor, 2002, 84). There is only mixing and contamination, which opens the way for a *surenchère* "dialectique," an upping of the anti, "more metaphor" (*plus de métaphore*), "more than one" (*plus d'un*). But in this logic, this "more than one metaphor" is also the "no more metaphor" (Id., 85). It is a logic where the other becomes the other's other, and metaphysics meta-metaphysics.

The ethical conclusions which deconstruction derives from this logic are quite unsettling at first. Ethics is ethics only if originally compro-

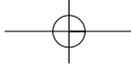
¹⁰ Along with the graphic, Derrida also privileges the eye to the point where, as Martin Jay noted, deconstruction is nothing but pictorialization of the world and grammaticalization of the image (Jay, 1993, 516).

mised by what is non-ethical. Ethics begins with an arch-perversion, and pervertibility functions as its condition of possibility and (therefore) of impossibility (Bennington, 2000, 41-2). Put simply, ethics is by definition pervertible. Thus, it is hospitality only that which is hostility (*hostipitalité*). It is justice only that which is perjury. It is fidelity only that which is betrayal. It is a gift only that which is denial. And it is inclusive only that which is exclusive (*Acts of Religion*, 388; *Of Hospitality*, 65).

To understand this ethical thinking, one has to remember that what characterizes the deconstructive endeavor is a striving to point out an essential contaminability which accounts for the possibility of purity, but also the a priori impossible attainability of such a purity. It is, as Bennington said (2000, 41), the logic of the quasi-transcendental, which is also a transcendental contraband. There is a complicity, even identity, between the conditions of possibility and the conditions of impossibility, all in such a way that the necessary possibility of contamination of that which is supposedly pure can be said to have always already been compromised in its very origin and formulation. This paradoxical situation goes back to the structure of *différance*¹¹ and its underlying concepts of totality and impossibility.

¹¹ *Différance* is a combination of the meanings of two French words: "to differ" [*différer*], which indicates distinction, inequality, or discernibility; and "to defer," which means interposition of delay (*SP*, 129). In addition to its phenomenological significance, *différance* also has a linguistic aspect relating to Derrida's objection to the arbitrariness which he saw in Saussure's distinction between signified and signifier. Such a distinction, Derrida thought, leaves open the possibility of a transcendental signified that is present for thought without a system of signifiers. What Derrida saw in Saussure's distinction between signified and signifier is that "the signified always already functions as a signifier." This, for Derrida, meant that the signified, be it a thing or a concept, is found only within a system of differences. Even the transcendental or originary signified is never absolutely present outside this system of differences. Understood in this structural way, the sign became an "instituted" sign, instead of an arbitrary sign. It meant that the sign is constituted by what is within it, which is the *trace* of other signs from which it differs, and its significance determined solely by its relation to other signs.

In order to deconstruct Saussure's linguistic theory, Derrida retained Saussure's principle of differences, but rejected its treatment of the signified. Then, focusing on what he called the phonocentric system of linear writing, Derrida created another neologism, *gramme*, or trace (*OG*, 49-50; *Margins*, 34, n. 9), which, together with *différance*, became the elements of his new grammatology, in which *différance* provided a counter to Saussure's arbitrariness. *Différance* is the play (*jeux*), or movement by which language (or any system of reference in general) becomes historically constituted (created, produced) as a system of differences. In Husserlian terms, *différance* makes the movement of signification possible by initiating temporalization, or a spacing between pretention



Developed in *The Introduction* and elaborated in “Violence and Metaphysics,” the concept of totality is the source of all the instability and indeterminacy that characterize Derrida’s logic. According to Derrida, totality is, by definition, finite because it encloses everything, bringing it within a limit. But totality must also be open to every thing, and is therefore unlimited and infinite (*WD*, 123, 167; also *Introduction*, 106; also Lawlor, 2002, 138, 185). Out of the difference between totality understood as finite, and infinity understood as totality, come all the ambiguities of the deconstructive discourse (Lawlor, 2002, 155). There is always a double necessity at play, as totality is the infinite sameness, but also the negation of what is not the same: What lies over the limit is not the same; it is other.

And so, it is *différance* and its underlying structure of totality which, for Derrida, constitute the conditions of possibility and impossibility of language, history, and everything else. It is also because of *différance*, that language is both univocal and equivocal. And it is because of *différance* that history is both “impossible, meaningless, in the finite totality, and . . . impossible, meaningless, in the positive and actual infinity” (*WD*, 123).

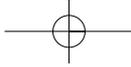
By Derrida’s own admission, the idea of totality and difference (alterity/sameness) is very much like Hegel’s absolute difference. This difference which “can be pure only by being impure,” Derrida said, is “doubtless, the most uncircumventable theme” (*WD*, 320, n. 91).

As to the validity of the ethical implications of this impossible system, Derrida believes that there is a lesser violence (i.e., metaphysical influence, dogmatism) in a contaminated ethics. Apparently, ethics can be made more coherent only if allowed to protect itself from itself through a risky measure of a self-inoculation, which can be realized through a contamination by its other (Bennington, 2000, 42). This pervertibility, says Derrida, is not different from Kant’s idea of radical evil as a necessary condition for the possibility of the good. Once the con-

(past) and retention (future). In so doing the trace also gives rise to protowriting, or prototrace (*SP*, 142-3).

Here, it is perhaps worth pointing out that, from a heuristic point of view, Derrida’s notion of the instituted sign is similar to the definition which Arab grammarians gave to the conjunctive particles (*and, or, rather*, etc.). In contrast to nouns or verbs, which have referent meanings, a conjunctive particle is defined as “that which indicates a sense in words other than in itself” (*al-harfū mā dalla ‘alā maʿnan fi ḡayrihi*) (Ben Gharbia, 2003, 435, quoting from *Kitāb al-Idāḥ fi ʿilal al-naḥw* by al-Zaḡḡāḡī).





tamination is accomplished, the pervertible then becomes the positive condition of all the good that ethics prescribes. Thus, for example, a positive condition of hospitality is the possibility that one might always welcome someone who will blow away one's house. Still, this does not commit anyone to indulge in actual perversion. Pervertibility affects all empirical acts, but leaves open each singular judgment as to the perversity of a given act. Also, because it is impossible to know ahead what is constitutively pervertible, Bennington says, ethical judgments and acts take the form of a "decisionistic" view (Id., 43). That is, without being formalized as in Kant's ethical system, or anchored in a particular ethos or ethnos, ethics becomes a matter of singular decisions pursuant to a singular situation.

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Perhaps nowhere are Derrida's ethical views as fully deployed as in his discourse on hospitality, which makes his text on the subject worth looking into. Hospitality, for example, is a subject of a lengthy discussion in *Adieu*, where Derrida examined various political institutions, the state, and the modern cosmopolitan world against the meaning of hospitality as a kind of a religious tie (*co-legere*). Hospitality also claims much of Derrida's attention in *The Gift of Death* where he deals with the Abrahamic sacrifice. In *Acts of Religion*, Derrida even broached what he called the Arabo-Islamic hospitality, albeit "with shyness and prudence," as he said.

As expected, what Derrida tries to accomplish in his various essays on hospitality is to establish the pervertibility of ethics and its impossibility. This he does by laying a network of connections between hospitality, forgiveness, and truthfulness, all centered on the idea of gift, which is of crucial importance. This importance of the concept of gift derives from the very phenomenological principle of the giving intuition. Basically, in order to appear, a phenomenon has to give itself, and a whole philosophy has grown around the moment of givenness (Marion, 1997, 285). Leading the deconstructionist side of this philosophy of the gift are Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, who, as Caputo has indicated in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, have become the advocates and apologists of the impossible (Caputo and Scanlon, 1999).

Crudely summarized, in its stress on the gift, Marion's phenomenology hopes to bring back the *donné* which modernity had banished—made into an *aban-donné*. For Marion, the success of such a move lies



in releasing the excess givenness, a mysticism which he tries to distinguish from negative theology and its commitment to an *hyperousios* (hyper-essentialism) affirming the highness of the Godhead. The phenomenological convergence of mysticism and deconstruction, Marion claims, resides in the structural impossibility of the Messiah being given (*étant donné*) (Marion, 1999; and 1999a). Though it is not possible for gift to exist, the impossible can still be experienced, and the donative flux of God can be grasped but only inadequately, due to the saturation of the phenomenon. That is, gift as such cannot be known but it can be thought of, and “God can give himself . . . as a gift for thought, as a gift that gives itself to be thought” (Marion, 1991, 49; also 1999, 59). Gift must also be surrounded by utter unconsciousness on the part of the beneficiary, as givenness supposes the *epoché* of the recipient. Not only that but forgetting the gift on the part of both the donor (to avoid narcissism) and donee is important. The gift as gift ought not appear as gift to either one. Not even generosity, which is positively described in Descartes’ *Passion of the Soul* as self-esteem and good use of one’s free will, is applicable to gift, since generosity is seen as invalidated by the reward of feeling generous (by giving myself I find myself) (Marion, 1999a, 125).

Like Marion, Derrida also thinks that the idea of gift is at the base of every anthropological and metaphysical system, but he finds no donative saturation in the gift. Gift, for Derrida, is an object whose horizon is strictly economics (the circuitry of the donor, the object, and the donee and the resulting debt and gratitude). Because of this aporia, this impossibility, gift is accessible only in terms of *khora*,¹² a “desert in the desert.” His notion of gift, Derrida says, is closer to the Lacanian formulation of the impossibility, which is “giving what one does not have to someone who does not want it” (see Derrida’s response to Marion, in Caputo and Scanlon, 1999, 43). Derrida believes in what is neither present nor given, the structural never, the presence that is always to come, the *différance* (Id., 199). Rather than a mystical experience of the “metaphysics of presence,” Derrida prefers a “mystical economy”¹³ where

¹² *Khora* relates to Plato’s vision of two worlds, the invisible (unchanging, ideal) and the visible (the changing, physical, corrupt), and what lies in between them, a world (space) in between, neither totally physical nor completely rational, a bastard kind of a place with no identified origin, and which “is apprehended by a kind of bastard reasoning” (*Timaeus*, 52b; see also Caputo, 1997, 86).

¹³ Along with the metaphor of the “Mystical Pad”, Derrida’s concept of economy is

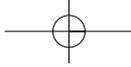
God is saved from the presence (in the name), much like Meister Eckhart said: "I pray God to be rid of God" (Id., 192).

With this idea of gift in mind, Derrida looks at hospitality as forgiveness and finds it to be merely a deception. This deception is not unlike that revealed in a joke told by Derrida about two Jews at the synagogue seeking absolution and renewal on Yom Kippur. One Jew says to the other, "I wish for you what you wish for me," and the other replies, "Already you're starting again!" And here, laughter turns into a *rire dément*, a demented laughter, a mad laughter. The "complicitous burst of laughter" of the two Jews who refuse to disarm and forgive each other is a denial that neither forgives nor forgets (*Acts of religion*, 382). Coming from an originary guilt, this laughter is also destined to degenerate into death, murder (Id., 383-4).

What brings forgiveness, murder and guilt into a circular unison is Derrida's affirmation that there is "an affinity . . . between the impossibility named death and the impossibility named forgiveness" (Id., 387). Forgiveness is impossible because one must forgive that which is unforgivable, yet without the unforgivable there is no forgiveness. That which is to be forgiven, "what there is to forgive, must be, must remain unforgivable—such is the logical aporia" of forgiveness (Id., 385). And because of this radical impossibility of forgiveness, all we are left with is an economy (*épargne*) of the gift, which is nothing but the economy of pleasure. This pleasure is procured by the superego's granting of a forgiveness of sorts, which allows a diminished ego to be inflated, thus bringing humor closer to a manic phase.¹⁴

taken from psychoanalysis and Freud, who conceived of the energetics of consciousness as an economy of opposition (see "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *WD*, 215; also Spivak's introduction to *OG*, xlii). The coincidence between Derrida's play of the signs, or *différance*, and Freud's economy of displacement governing the relationship between the principles of pleasure repression (*thanatos*) is the subject of one of Krell's criticism of Derrida. Derrida's unrestricted use of the metaphor of economy, Krell says, is a sort of a "Hegelianism without reserve, a dialectic without the depletion allowance of the Absolute," allowing Derrida to avoid the entanglement of signs through an elaborate trafficking scheme in alterity (unconscious), and the death of the subject (Krell, 1988, 8). The role of economy as an organizing concept in Derrida's work is also examined by Critchley (1999, 167-170), who looked into how the economy, money, hauntology, and ethics are woven together in *The Specters of Marx*. Noting Derrida's stress on the chrematological role of money as a sign, and the parallel between *différance* and credit, Critchley concluded that money is kind of a deconstruction, and deconstruction a sort of a money-making art, a *chrematologie*.

¹⁴ It is not very clear, but it appears that the unconscious, which, among many other things, plays the role of the *third party* in Derrida's scheme, is capable of forgiveness.



Hospitality and forgiveness are tied together, and “Whoever asks for hospitality, asks, in a way, for forgiveness and whoever offers hospitality offers forgiveness—and forgiveness must be infinite or it is nothing,” a mere excuse or exchange (Id., 380). And just as forgiveness is impossible, so is hospitality. “To be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken [*surprendre*], to be ready to not be ready, if such is possible, to let oneself be overtaken, to not even let oneself be overtaken, to be surprised, in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped [*violé*], stolen [*volé*] . . . precisely where one is not ready to receive . . .” (*Acts of Religion*, 361, italics original). In any event, readiness to welcome simply negates hospitality, for if there is “a generous character of a hospitable *habitus*, there is no merit in it, no welcome of the other as other” (*ibid.*).

* * *

One of the many ways Derrida tries to demonstrate the pervertibility of ethics is in “Hospitality,” where he focuses his attention on Massignon. There, he presents the impossibility of forgiveness as a “tragedy of compassion and of inter-subjectivity as destiny of hostage, *hôte*, and madness of substitution.” To this end, he begins by showing that hospitality is one of the main philosophical preoccupations of Massignon, a fervent Christian who saw in Islam a faithful heir of Abraham’s hospitality (*Acts of Religion*, 370). Derrida then tells us how Massignon saw in hospitality the essence of the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Aware of this Abrahamic hospitality and its roots in the strangeness of Abraham and his pilgrimage to Palestine, Massignon tried to articulate its significance in his own life and in his writing. He even used it to call attention to the plight of the Palestinians in their refugee camps. For him, these Arab refugees, like their father Abraham, are “the last witness of this cult of hospitality that our racisms deny” (quoted from *Sacred Hospitality* in *Acts of Religion*, 369).

Then, Massignon’s preoccupation with, and understanding of, hospitality are shown as being overshadowed by his confirmed missionary intent, as well as by some biographical references to homosexuality. Though unstated, the insinuation in this mix of faith and “sacred hospitality” is that Massignon’s idea of hospitality is of the hierodulic type (*Acts of Religion*, 375). What is striking though is that Derrida’s deroga-

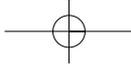
Indeed, as indicated in *Acts of Religion*, 382, Derrida does not believe that an unconscious forgiveness is nonsense.

tory attitude towards Massignon's homosexuality is here in total contrast to the way Derrida treated Jean Genet in *Glas*. There, Genet's homosexuality was ironized to the level of a new kind of morality.¹⁵ Not only does Derrida's deconstruction of Massignon betray a surprising ambivalence toward homosexuality, but the deliberate stress on the negativity of Massignon's homosexuality also undermines the claims of deconstruction, showing its ethical gestures to be merely a sleight of the (two) hands, and a double reading of the sort described in "Ousias and gramme" (*Margins*, 65; *WD*, 293; *OG*, 62).

Indeed, Derrida exploited every connection which Massignon may have had with homosexuality, including his innocent, even pious "Prayer for Sodom," the first of "The Three Prayers of Abraham," to insinuate a flawed character in Massignon and a failing sense in his "Abrahamesque hospitality." This is further reinforced by a reference Derrida made to Massignon in another essay, *Of Hospitality* (153), where Massignon's name comes up in connection with the Biblical allegories of the guests of Sodom, as well as the guests of the Benéi Balia'a at Mount Ephraim in Judges. Massignon's brief homosexual encounters (his relations with Yāsīn b. Ismā'īl, Luis de Cuadra, and perhaps Ğabbūrī) are then presented as "interminable temptation." And to the stain of homosexuality Derrida adds a hint of anti-Semitism (*Acts of Religion*, 418). Finally, Massignon's intent to convert Muslims through a scheme of substitution, or *Badaliyya*, is presented as the *coup* that blows up the host's house.

Badaliyya is the Arabic word for substitutability (*suppléance*), which Massignon uses to express the redemptive role of suffering. Rooted in the idea of solidarity in evil and reversibility in the good, this Christian notion of substitutability conveys the atonement for others through the assumption of responsibility for their sins. Such an act of substitutability is readily recognizable for Christians in Jesus's death on the cross for the sake of his followers. This substitutability is also recognizable for Massignon in Saint Francis of Assisi's ordeals in Egypt during the

¹⁵ In *Glas*, in order to displace Hegel's speculative dialectic, Derrida juxtaposed two columns of commentaries, one on Hegel and his discourse on spirit, Christianity, love and the family, the other on Genet, the thief, the homosexual, the ironist of communal morality. For a helpful guide to this difficult work, see the two essays by Critchley on Derrida's reading of Hegel, and the other on his reading of Genet in Critchley (1999), who, strangely enough, thinks that Genet's postmortem book on the Palestinians, *Prisoner of Love*, may have gone the way of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, advocating a Palestinian nation (Critchley, 1999, 47).



Crusades of 1221 AD. Substitutability is a relationship that can easily issue into a hostage situation, even a hostage system, which is exactly what Massignon's Badaliyya is.

In establishing his *Badaliyya*, Massignon invoked the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, and also the precedent of *mubāhala* involving the Prophet Mohammad and the Christians of Nağrān (Massignon, 1997, 117; Harpigny, 1981, 119-121). *Badaliyya* became the name of a mystical community which Massignon founded with the Spaniard Mary Kahil, in Cairo in 1934, and which was blessed by Pope Pius XI in 1943. Membership in the *Badaliyya* was based on the commitment of each member, or Badalio, to offer his or her self as a hostage, "*une offrande franciscaine*," in the land of Islam for the salvation of Muslims (Harpigny, 1981, 123). "We offer ourselves as pledges," says the founding statute, which goes on to detail the missionary intent of the initiative of substitution. This includes the guiding to the source of salvation of those people who were cut off long ago from the promise of the Messiah as children of Hagar, and helping Muslims rediscover Christ, 'Īsā Ibn Maryam (*Acts of Religion*, 377).

From all the above, Derrida draws the conclusion that hospitality, which so attracted and preoccupied Massignon is, in the end, delimited by the operative idea of mystical substitutability (*suppléance*), a hostage system which is nothing but a missionary calculus. In this contaminated hospitality, Massignon stands as the digressive element, the errant stranger who blows your house away, who makes hospitality the impossible act that it is.

After describing this errant host, Derrida turns his attention to hospitality in the Arabo-Islamic culture, only to characterize it as deviation and pervertibility. The connection of the Arabic term *ḡār* to the Hebrew *gvr* (neighborliness), and the Phoenician meaning of sanctum are invoked, but an undue stress is put on the sense of hostility and enmity which is only one of the meanings in the Arabic *ḡār*. In *ḡār* and *daḥīl* (intruder, stranger, wayfarer), Derrida recognizes the conservation of the nomadic tradition and customary law of hospitality, but he relates them to what he believes to be an almost universal semantic link between 'stranger' and 'enemy.' This, he says, is born out by the relationship of the Latin *hostis* and in the modern word *hostility*. Derrida then asserts that in this "indirect and diverted trace of a motif from the Arabo-Islamic culture of hospitality," we are "in the process of attending to the double motif of pervertibility and deviation." This deviation, he says, is nothing but the "swerving of the road, the migratory errancy

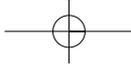
of the foreign errant," who makes a halt for customary hospitality. But inscribed in the very migratory errance¹⁶ of the foreign errant (*l'errant étranger*), he adds, is the pervertibility of hospitality and the nature of the strangeness of the guest that "can both poison the host and therefore also poison itself" (*Acts of Religion*, 402).

There is a fleeting reference to Ḥātim al-Ṭa'ī (*Acts of Religion*, 405), almost a caricature of the legendary example of Arab hospitality, taken from the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, which gets caught up in Derrida's excessive interest in mourning¹⁷ and spectral speculation. This is a legendary story, in which Ḥātim rises out of his grave to slaughter a camel in offering to the wayfarer, and which Derrida reduces to "a scene of posthumous hospitality." Along with this oral tale, the meaning of some of the Arabic terms of hospitality are mentioned, with much stress on the "digressive" character of the host, and the pervertible nature of hospitality: *qirā* (entertaining the guest), *da'wa* (invitation, to a meal, to shelter, to conversion, etc.), and *ḍimma* (sanctum, self-worth). Left out, however, are the many other meanings (virtues) of hospitality, including, *saḥā'*, *ḍiyāfa*, *karam*, *nadā*, *ḡūd*, *ḥafāwa*, etc. Most unfortunate, the concept of *ḍimma* is never discussed or, at least, related to an early mention of that concept, at the opening of his Seminar on Hospitality. There, Derrida quoted from *Difficult Freedom*, where Levinas refers to "the voice of a Muslim prince," Mohammed V, who defended the Jews, his subjects (*ḍimmi*), against the French and German in W.W.II (*Acts of Religion*, 367-368).

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida also raises the problem of truthfulness, referring to Kant's example of the criminal who comes asking a host for the whereabouts of one of his guests whom he intends to kill. Kant

¹⁶ A term frequently used by Heidegger, *errance*, is the French translation of the German *die Irre*. Richardson introduced it into English with a particular stress on the sense of "error" and "aberrance" which it incorporates (see Allison's Introduction to *SP*, xli). The use of this term in the context of hospitality, a cherished virtue of the Bedouin, betrays a European urban bias that found its articulation in Kant and especially Max Weber, who strives to preserve a Biblical ritual cleanliness to the 'urban' roots of the Western Judeo-Christian culture (see *supra*, note 32).

¹⁷ For an insightful look into Derrida's excessive preoccupation with mourning, see David Farrell Krell, *The Purest of Bastards. Works of Mourning, Art and Affirmation in the Thought of Jacques Derrida*. University Park, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. This book explores the psychoanalytical view of mourning and its origins in narcissism and in early libidinal development. Derrida's mourning of his mother and that of Augustine are compared. Critchley (1999, 14) has also noted the similarity between ethics and mourning.



says that the host should tell the truth, even if the criminal were coming to kill the guest. Derrida's discussion of this question is highly sophisticated, drawing on the many urbane insights of Kant and Augustine. The question of truthfulness is also broached in *The Gift of Death*, where Derrida continues Kierkegaard's reflections on the sacrificial event in the Abrahamic story. Both Derrida and Kierkegaard stress the murderous nature of the act of Abraham, the sacrifice of Isaac, and lend great importance to theatricality, drawing on a Greek tradition of the tragic. Faith, for Kierkegaard, is conditional, and Isaac's faith is obtained only if Abraham is made to appear a villain. The sacrifice of Isaac then becomes a melodramatic event, featuring an atrocious criminal and unforgivable act, Abraham's intent to murder his child. It is, Kierkegaard says, the story of a father who transgresses morality, and stages a lie to safe his son's faith in God: "O Lord in heaven, I thank Thee. After all it is better for [Isaac] to believe that I am a monster, rather than that he should lose faith in Thee" (*Fear and Trembling*, 27). Adding to the drama is the un-endearing character of the God of Abraham, who gives Isaac only to seek to annihilate him (Id., 34). Similarly, the story of Abraham is, for Derrida, the aporia of ethical responsibility, which drives the Patriarch to transgress, sacrifice and betray morality by giving death to his son. Thus, faithfulness to god is fulfilled in an act of treachery, and ethical responsibility is realized in an act of secrecy (not lying to Isaac, but not telling the truth either).

* * *

It is pointless to try to point out the errors and defects of a thinking system, which, like deconstruction, is pure indeterminacy. Besides, who has enough temerity to confront Derrida, a man whose whole project, as Gregory L. Ulmer has pointed out, is "to build a rigorous, systematic discourse based on the equivocity of language," and a willingness to shock, even scandalize (Ulmer, 1981, 31), who wants to confront Derrida's redoubtable panglossalism and his shaman-like ability to mix phonemes (Hartman, 1981, 20) and grind homonyms, antonyms, and synonyms into a catastrophic dehiscence that shatters conceptual categories and casts them to the wild winds of dissemination. In so doing, Derrida can be devastating, or, at minimum, irritating.¹⁸ The only hope

¹⁸ As irritating as "the glandular secretion of a tiny insect," said Krell (2000, 47) alluding with pun to a "Spanish fly," which, in German, is called *Kantheridin*, and which can be presented as a pun on Kant.

in the face of such a deconstructive force is irony, which, coincidentally, and as Critchley (1999, 15) said, “is [also] the genre of ethical discourse.”

And where better to find irony when discussing hospitality than in language itself. After all, it was Derrida who explained to his students “that a seminar on hospitality is a meditation and an exercise of language” (*Acts of Religion*, 409). It was also Derrida who reminded us of Levinas’s proclamation that “language is hospitality” (*Of Hospitality*, 135). And, finally, it was Derrida who asked: “Is there hospitality without at least the fantasy of this auto-nomy? Of this auto-mobile auto-affection of which language’s hearing-oneself-speak is the privileged figure?” (Id., 137). But language is not sought here for the purpose of philological thematization and etymological variation of (Qur’ānic) terms and structures relating to hospitality, which could be undertaken elsewhere. The intent is to underscore the fact that the core of Derrida’s deconstruction and its ethical claims are, as indicated above, rooted in a particular understanding of language, and the relationship between the phonetical and the grammatical.

Philosophy may be an organizing schema, which reflects our deeply held values and beliefs, but it is language that reveals the essence of our beliefs. Yet the language we speak is also shaped by the same worldview it articulates. The conventional nature of our native speech contributes to the patterns of our thought, but the linguistic forms needed for the articulation and expression of thought are not indifferent to the metaphysics of our outlook on life, our view of the world, the self, autonomy and causality. This intricate relationship between linguistic structures and philosophical thought was one of the most important lessons of early Islamic thinking. We all remember the logical and ontological difficulties with which the Greek concepts of *ousia* and being confronted the early Arabo-Islamic thinkers.¹⁹ As A. C. Graham has pointed out, because the Arabic translation of Aristotle’s work was literal, Aristotle was understood to be writing about existence and essence but “never about being” (Graham, 1965, 226; italics original). This, Graham said, “gave the Arabic ontology a fresh start, free from the confusion from which Greek philosophy was barely beginning to find

¹⁹ These difficulties centered around the use of the infinitive *wuġūd* for *to einai*, and the passive participle *mawġūd* for *to on*, or what exists. Other concepts were also devised, including *mahiyyah* “quiddity” (combining *mā* ‘what’ and the copulative pronoun *huwa/hīya* ‘he/she’), and *dāt* (from the possessive particle *dū*). For *ousia*, they also used *ġawhar*, probably from Persian origin (A. C. Graham, 1965, 226).



the way out” (or slipping into, according to Heidegger’s notion of forgetfulness). Al-Farābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 438/1037) were credited for the “discovery of the ontological difference between essence and existence,” but, as Graham said, they are hardly worth crediting with this ontological discovery. This is not to begrudge these eminent philosophers, whose native language is not even Arabic (al-Farābī was of Turkish descent, and Ibn Sīnā, a Persian), but simply to indicate that it is just impossible for an Arabic speaker to confuse the essence and existence of referent things. The predicative sentences, Graham said, are naturally so structured as to suggest these existential distinctions (Graham, 1965, 227; also Shehadi, 1982, 39, n. 14; Mahdi, 1970, 53; and Afnan, 1964, 29).

There is a clear difference between the surface grammar of the Arabic language, a Semitic language which does not require any word or syntactical device to link subject and predicate in nominal sentences, and that of the Indo-European languages where a copula (to be, *to on*, and *to einai*) is almost always required syntactically. The relationship between the surface structure Arabic and its deep structure is also such that there is a lesser possibility of confusing subject and object, or crisscrossing between the psychological and the grammatical. This is in contrast to the predicative structure of the Indo-European languages,²⁰ where grammar requires that a sentence consist of a subject and a predicates, but where the grammatical and psychological subjects do not always coincide; nor do the grammatical and psychological predicates (Strong *et al.*, 1975, 95). The philosophical significance of this linguistic phenomenon was not lost on Hegel, who warned in the Preface

²⁰ In “The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics,” Derrida pointed to Benveniste’s remark that not all languages dispose of the verb “to be.” In fact, the verb “to be” is missing in many languages, including Indo-European ones. Derrida seems to take Benveniste’s word for the fact that the Greek language had such a verb, and that it had a logical function (Aristotle indicates that this is the only function of “is”), as well as many other uses, including its use as a present participle, which can be made a substantive (*Margins*, 196). Derrida shares in Benveniste’s view that “The study of sentences with the verb ‘to be’ is obscured by the difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of setting up a satisfactory definition of the nature and functions of the verb ‘to be.’” It is not possible to determine whether “to be” is a verb, why it retains a substantive character, or why it is missing from many languages. It seems that there are two functions of the copula “is,” one grammatical, as a mark of identity, and one lexical, as a verb “to be.” In languages where there is no verb “to be,” the function is distributed among other words and verbs. In a Russian or Hungarian nominal sentence, for example, the copulative function is given by a pause, or a zero morpheme, which acquires a value in the utterance (*Margins*, 200-1).

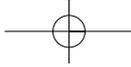


to *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the form and content of speculative statements are such that the reader is thrown off balance, going back and forth between subject and predicate. Referring to one of the examples he provided, 'God is being,' Hegel said that thinking loses the firm objective basis in the subject as it progresses in making the transition from subject (God) to predicate (being). When in the predicate, thinking is thrown back onto the subject, but missing it, it finds itself thrown into the subject of the content (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, at 39; see also Bernasconi, 1985, 76). Nor was this lost on Heidegger, who realized that a "reversal of the meaning of the words *subjectum* and *objectum*" had taken place in modern times following Descartes' philosophical insights and the rise of rationalism (see, e.g., "Modern Sciences, Metaphysics, and Mathematics," in *Basic Writings*, 280). It is perhaps due to this tension in the Indo-European languages between the logical necessity that the subject be an identical unity and the grammatical requirement that the subject be predicated, that the Western philosophical discourse is often in conflict with theological certainty, and more at ease with metaphysical doubt. This is also, perhaps, why a metaphysical need to posit a Fichtean subject ($I = I$) was born in the Western philosophical discourse. Finally, it is perhaps due to this confusion between the algebraic value of equality and the grammatical notion of sameness, between the mathematical property ($I = I$) and the copulative proposition S is P , that Nietzsche found the Western philosophical discourse to be caught in an unwholesome play of logic and grammar, of deeds and doers.²¹ It is not clear how the new Derridian grammatology and the syntax of erasure will improve the murkiness of the Western philosophical discourse on Being.²²

What is more pertinent to our discussion, before we proceed further, is the conceptual implication of the linguistic structures of Arabic with respect to subjectivity and ethics. The philosophical and even metaphysical underpinnings of Arabic and its disjunctive system of discourse require time and space, but there is one particular aspect, which is

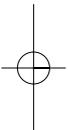
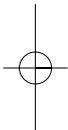
²¹ *The Genealogy of Morals*, 179. Note that Nietzsche's argument here is for the action and against the subject.

²² Heidegger came to believe that even the propositional language is forgetful of the question of being, which led him to the practice of crossing over of the word Being. He would write Being under *erasure* ("sous rature" as does Derrida), so that a word that is necessary remains legible, but is crossed out because inadequate (see Spivak's Introduction to *OG*, xv-xvi).



very significant to the issue of subjectivity and subjecthood, and is here briefly broached. This is the prominence of the noun, as opposed to the verb, or prepositions—a feature also common to other Afroasiatic languages (Bakalla, 1982, 45; Lipinski, 1997, § 29.1). Though the noun is used as either subject or predicate, the subject is always a noun (Versteegh, 1977, 71). Interestingly, even in verbal sentences, the verb tends to take the morphological structure of a noun. This, for example, is the case of the imperfect verb, *muḍāriʿ*, where the inflectional endings mimic the various cases of a noun (nominal *u, un*; accusative *a, an*; genitive *i, in*). As a matter of fact the term *muḍāriʿ* means just that, “resembling,” which is a reference to the similarity between the imperfect verb and the noun (Id., 78). The priority of the noun is also indicated by the reference to the demonstrative and pronominal pronouns as nouns (Id., 51). But the privileging of the subject holds even when the subject is quasi-absent or is unstated in some grammatical structures. In the verbal sentence *ḡalasa* “he sat down,” for example, the subject is pronominally incorporated in the one-word sentence, and the personal pronoun does not appear. The personal pronoun appears in such a verbal sentence only to emphasize the subject (*kuntu anā l-ḡālis*, “It was me who was sitting down”), or when the word order subject-predicate requires it (*raʿānī wa anā aḡlisu*, “He saw me as I was sitting”) (see Fischer, 2001, § 266).

Of course, the priority of the noun was reinforced with the Aristotelian connection between nouns and substances (*ousia*), and between verbs and accidents (Versteegh, 1977, 142-143). But the logical and grammatical boundaries did not exhaust the significance of the structural predominance of noun in Arabic and Afroasiatic languages. The predominance of the noun/subject, for example, is strongly asserted in the aesthetical domain. This can be clearly seen in the Ancient Egyptian art and the absence of action in its two-dimensionality. Indeed, Egyptian sculptors almost never represented their subject in motion. They limited human activity to a small number of passive poses (standing, sitting, kneeling, etc.), because, as part of the eternal rituals, the figure is the recipient of worship and sacrifice. Designed to function through limitless time, the statues and reliefs do not exhibit human or divine activities, because action for Egyptians is transitory and finite, and inconsequential in terms of eternity. Only static figures can show cosmic equilibrium and repose (Fazzini *et al.*, 1999, 20). But as pointed out by Goedicke (1997, 426), this artistic depiction which stresses the actor



also finds a parallel in the Ancient Egyptian speech pattern where even the verbal expression is given a nominal form. Thus, for instance, the phrase *sadm.f* (“his hearing,” “he hears”) uses a possessive construction, resulting in an existential state specified by a possessive suffix, instead of a dynamic act such as “he hears.” Interestingly, the phrase *sadm.f* is also used as a paradigm for the Egyptian verb (Gardiner, 1073, §§ 39, 411.1).

Though the stress is on the subject, the temporality of the Arabic verb, just like temporality in Ancient Egypt art, places serious limits on presence, giving a different meaning to subjectivity, transforming it into a span rather than a locus. As indicated before, the Arabic verb knows only two forms: *maḍī* (past) and or *mudāriʿ* (imperfect). Because the imperfect tense expresses both present and future times, there is no verb form for the present (*ʾʿl al-ḥāl*) without the use of adverb (e.g., “now”). As described by one grammarian, al-Zaḡḡāḡī (d. 337/949), the present tense comes about while the speaker speaks, which is neither in the elapsed moment, nor in the future one. The present tense “takes place in the past and in the beginning of the future. The present tense is the future” (see Abed, 1991, 119-20, and n. 1). In some respects, this conception of time is close to the horizontal structure of Heidegger’s temporality, where the present is held as the not-yet which is in the process of having-been (*Being and Time*, 463/411).

These linguistic features of Arabic are not without significance to the ethical and philosophical problems of subjectivity at hand. They go a long way in explaining why, despite all the ontological, biological, psychological, and socio-historical difficulties²³ that cloud it, subjectivity is the cornerstone of the Islamic religion and the bedrock of its ethics. One has only to recall the Qur’ānic principle “*wa lā taziru wāziratun wizra uḥrā*” (6, 164; 17, 25; 35, 18; 39, 7; 53, 38), and its legal, ethical, and eschatological ramifications, to understand the importance of subjectivity in Islam. One also realizes the sense of urgency with which modern and postmodern pronouncements on subjectivity and otherness ought to be carefully and critically considered when it comes to the fundamental difference between the conceptualization of subjectivity and subjecthood in Islam and in the Western thinking. From an Islamic

²³ See, e.g., Critchley’s essay “Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity?” Critchley (1999); and for a more extensive treatment of the subject, see Critchley and Dews (1995).



point of view, a consciousness that has access to itself through a Fichtean slave-master²⁴ structure ($I = I$) raises difficult questions, impinging on the purity of faith, the will to submission, and the fitness of mind that is called on to bear witness to Allah. This consciousness finds its exalted state, or authentic being, to use a Heideggerian term, in *al-nafs al-muṭma'inna* ("the soul at peace"), which is the ultimate overcoming of all the ills and perplexities of Being, an ontological therapeutic (a felicitous Greek term which combines healing and worshiping). Ethically and from the point of view of responsibility, the principle *wa lā taziru . . .* also stands against the stress on alterity and its exculpatory implications. Finally, being a phenomenon of pure consciousness of an awakened-life, alterity is theologically incommensurate with the systemic inclusiveness and plenitude of *waḡh Allāh* (the face of Allah) which spans all states of life, be it prenatally in the uterus, in childhood, in health, in sickness, in sleep, in awakening, in sanity or in senility: "*And wherever you turn your face, there is God's face; verily Allah is infinite, all-knowing*" (2, 115). Yet this originary plenitude in which the Islamic ethics finds its source is not an outward directionality, but an inward intentionality: "*It is not righteousness that you turn your faces eastward and westward, but righteous is he who believes . . .*" (2, 177).

* * *

The Arabo-Islamic grammarians achieved great advances in linguistics, and even in the field of metalinguistics, but Muslim thinkers maintained a clear distinction between the logical and the grammatical.²⁵ Behind this linguistic-philosophical attitude are some wonderful insights that cannot be ignored by Muslims and non-Muslims who are trying to ascertain the position of Islam in relation to the postmodern discourse on moral agency. In this regard, the linguistic-philosophical insights of Abū al-Faṭḥ 'Uṭmān Ibn Ğinnī (320/932-392/1001) are quite revealing, especially as regards the topic at hand, namely, deconstruction and hospitality.

²⁴ See, e.g., Scruton (1997, 204).

²⁵ This is demonstrated in one of the most entertaining and enlightening pieces of Arabic literature, a book by Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī entitled *al-Imtā' wa l-Mu'ānasa*. It describes a princely forum held in 320/932 in Baghdad for a disputation between a grammarian, Abū Sa'īd al-Sīrāfi, and a logician, Abū Biṣr Mattā ibn Yūnus, and in which, in my view, both disputants lost to the Arabic language. For an engaging description of this intellectual encounter, see Mahdi (1967).



As M. H. Bakalla (1972), Mehiri (1973), Versteegh (1977), and Carter (1991) have shown, Ibn Ğinnī contributed greatly to the advances of linguistics, focusing on the descriptive studies of the morpho-phonological patterns (*sarf*) of Arabic. He gave a diachronic description of the lexical and grammatical changes that Arabic words undergo in speech and writing, and accounted for them in terms of phonetic and phonological structures. He studied the Arabic vowels (*a, u, i*) and consonants and how they combine homogeneously and heterogeneously within the radical bases of Arabic. He analyzed the various phonetic and phonemic effects of affixation and insertion of non-radicals, including addition (*ziyāda*), substitution (*badal*), elision and assimilation (*idġām*, regressive or progressive), and doubling (*tašdīd*). Ibn Ğinnī also studied the inflectional and derivational affixes (and infixes) that are used to modify grammatical and lexical morphemes, including *qalb* (letter change), *naql* (metathesis), *ḥadf* (elision), and *ziyāda* (addition of a letter). Like all Arab grammarians, Ibn Ğinnī accounted for these linguistic axiomatics in terms of *ʿilal* (illnesses or deformations), which inflict the word and offend against the law of harmonious speech (Versteegh, 1977, 25). All of this is the stuff of a thinking that would seem to Derrida as logocentrism in the making.

Yet one of the most remarkable thing about Ibn Ğinnī's linguistics insights is the way in which he obliterated all barriers between human behavior and the behavior of sound, using metaphors that are capable of self-deconstruction. Interestingly, most of the metaphors deployed in the grammatical analysis of Ibn Ğinnī (and in other Arab grammarians) are ethical in character and relate most specifically to hospitality and aggression. Take, for example, the rule of *al-ḥukm al-ṭārīʿ* which Ibn Ğinnī formulated in *al-Ḥaṣāʾiʿ*. These rules, which M. G. Carter has translated as the "rule of the adventitious," establishes that "authority belongs to that which arrives suddenly and unpredictably, from a distant pace" (Carter, 1991, 200). In describing this linguistic rule in *Ḥaṣāʾiʿ* (II, 62), Ibn Ğinnī also speaks of *ġulbat ḥukm al-ṭārīʿ* (the victory or prevalence of the adventitious), and of *huġūm al-ḥaraka ʿalā l-ḥaraka* (the aggression of vowels against one another"). Carter could not help being impressed with "the violent imagery" of Ibn Ğinnī's grammar (Id., 201). And indeed, the gist of these rules is that vowels and consonants tend to intrude on each other in a deadly fashion.²⁶

²⁶ In an odd way, these rules give a true meaning to "war of language against itself," which recurs in Derrida discourse (see. e.g., *SP*, 14; *VM*, 129)



But the “rule of the adventitious” is not limited to phonemes. It also operates in the morphological and semantic domains. These effects of the adventitious rules are exhaustively treated in Ibn Ğinnī’s three volumes of *Ḥaṣā’iṣ*.

One of the phonological impacts of the rule of adventitious is, for example, the complete assimilation of the article *al* to the consonant articulated with the front of the tongue (e.g., *t*, *s*, *d*). These are the letters referred to by the Arabic linguists as the “solar letters” (*al-ḥurūf al-šamsiyya*). Another common morphological impact of the rule of the adventitious is the displacement of the nunation (*tanwīn*) ending of a noun as a result of the intrusion of the definite article *al* (*kitābun*, *al-kitāb*). The effect of the rule of the adventitious is also seen in the removal of the feminine sign (*tā’ marbūṭa*) as a result of the *yy* suffix of *nisba* (*al-Baṣratu*, *Baṣriyyun* “Basran”). The effect of the rule of the adventitious in the domain of semantics can be seen in the transformation of the interrogative *’ayyu* to the exclamatory *’ayyi* (*Ḥaṣā’iṣ*, III, 62-63; Carter, 1991, 201). The interrogative *a* can also change the contextual meaning of a sentence to assertion or denial (*a-lastu bi-rabbikum?* “Am I not your God?”) (Carter, 1991, 202).

Clearly, operating like Derrida’s hospitality, these linguistic patterns are all instances of a welcome gone wry, with the host letting himself “be overtaken . . . be surprised, in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped [*violé*], stolen [*volé*] . . .” This linguistic parallel to hospitality in the Derridian sense is made even more explicit in one of the most common structures, the genitive construction, where the rule of the adventitious is always present. Known in Arabic as *idāfa* (conjunction, annexion), the genitive is a grammatical structure used to express various relationships of possession or belonging to person, object, space, or time (Lipinski, 1997, §§ 51.19-51.26; Cantarino, 1974, II, 111-123). Interestingly, the Arabic term *idāfa* shares its roots with the very word used for hospitality (*ḍayf* “host”, *ḍiyāfa* “hospitality”). Not only is this precisely what Derrida would call an originary perversion, and a devious (impossible) hospitality, but the Latin terms for genitive construction (*nomen regens* or governing, and *nomen rectum* or subjoined, governed) are even blunt in their revelation of the hierarchical nature of this linguistic relationships. They even include a libidinal reference, which may appeal to the psychoanalytical bend of deconstruction, which Krell caricatured in “Engorged Philosophy.”²⁷

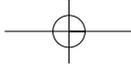
²⁷ The note itself is a dense playfulness using libidinal, and genital references from



Among the mostly trilateral roots of the Arabic language, the Arab linguists distinguish what they call the weak root (e.g., containing a long vowel as the stem). These words are most susceptible to the rule of the adventitious. Ironically, the word *idāfa* itself is just one such a term. Yet this is not the end of this pervertibility. Mention has already been made of the removal of the feminine sign (*tā' marbūta*). This abuse of hospitality wrought by the rule of the adventitious is even hilariously wicked (liberating?) in its hermaphroditic effect. This, for example, is the case of the genitive involving numbers (3 to 10), where the feminine sign is added to masculine nouns, and removed from feminine ones (androgynization? *taḥnīt* or transvertitization?). But the rule of the adventitious, like Derrida's *différance*, knows no limits. There is even an improper or inauthentic *idhafa* (*idāfa ḡayr ḥaqīqiyya*, where the genitive is joined with a substantive in the definite state: *al-karīmu l-naḡsi*, "the one of the noble soul") (see Fischer, § 146, n. 3; also *Ḥaṣā'i'is*, II, 35-36 for a colorful genitive joining the negative *lā*).

The amazing thing about Ibn Ğinnī's linguistic thinking is that his grammatical concepts are often more performative than constative. Actualizing what they enunciate, they are inscribed with their irreducible meanings. A clear example of this is Ibn Ğinnī's study of *ḥadf*, or the reductive effect of the rule of the adventitious, where a consonant, a vowel, or a combination thereof, are elided under certain structural conditions of the Arabic speech. Per chance, one of the examples given by Ibn Ğinnī is *'akrama*, a hospitality term deriving from the root *krm* ("hospitality, generosity, munificence"), and meaning: "they honored, rewarded." The use of the affix *'u* in the first person form *'ukrimu* ("I honor" or "reward"), Ibn Ğinnī argues, results in the dropping of *'a* from the sequence of the (hypothetical) *'u'akrimu* (see Bakalla, 1982, 207). Another performative gesture is seen in Ibn Ğinnī's use of many terms of aggression, showing how even these violent terms are themselves hopelessly exposed to the ruthlessness of the rule of the adventitious. One such a term is *yaḡzūna* ("they conquer," "they raid"; root *ḡzw*, "razzia"), the archetypical word for aggression. The vowel *u* in *yaḡzūna*, Ibn Ğinnī says, is not the stem vowel (*ḡzw*) that is lost, but a backward projection of the *u* vowel of the suffix *ūna*, which stands for the masculine plural ending (they). The same is true of *ya'dūna* ("they

Freud, mixed with images from Sandor Ferenczi, which Krell used in presenting Derrida's denigration of the voice (see Krell, 1988, 9; and 2000, 101).



attack”, root “*.d.w.*”, “enmity”), another term of aggression. The effect of the rule of the adventitious is even more evident in *yarmūna* (“to throw”), where the *u* vowel displaces the radical *y* in *my*.

An what could be more significant than the fact that the word *ṭārīʿ*, which Ibn Ḡinnī uses to refer to his rule of the adventitious, is itself imbued with a meaning that is, in Derrida’s words, *particulièrement hospitalier*. Invoking the burning campfires at night that attract the wayfarer of the desert, *tārīʿ* is the quintessential reference to the legendary Bedouin hospitality. Or, in Derrida’s words, *ṭārīʿ* is the unexpected visitor, the stranger, and the *arrivant*.

Derrida is familiar with all sorts of chances and coincidences of meeting. In “Ulysses Gramophone”, for example, Derrida refers to “the chance form of letters,” the “chance nature (*l’aléa*) of meetings), and the “genealogical chances” (“Ulysses Gramophone”, 32, 34). But one of the chances he met with but could not recognize is the very *errancy* of the *errant*, whom he met with in his discourse on Arab hospitality, Ḥātim al-Ṭāʿī. As Jan Retso has pointed out *Ṭay*, the nickname of Ḥātim, is derived from the root “*.t.w.*” “to roam,” “to err” (Retso, 2003, 520).

A question now arises as to what is Ibn Ḡinnī’s idea of hospitality, and whether these linguistic insights are any indication of some notion of pervertibility of ethics in his mind. Or, to put it in another way, “does Ibn Ḡinnī’s rule of the adventitious betrays a conceivably deviant hospitality?” The answer is a categorical no.

Ibn Ḡinnī, like Derrida, may have entertained the thought that a guest might visit some trouble upon his host, but it is just too difficult to think that Ibn Ḡinnī was beholden to a belief that the rewards of an act are an essential part of that act, or that gratitude and ingratitude are constitutive of the conditions of the possibility of hospitality. As a matter of fact, as the example of Ḥātim al-Ṭāʿī shows, hospitality is always perceived among Bedouins and Muslims as a ruinous affair, and, as such, its is totally indifferent to the gratification of those who assume it, or those who benefit from it. Ḥātim, the legend has it, exhausted all his wealth, and lived poor. He even killed his own Arabian horse to feed his Roman guests, who came to ask for that very horse, which raises a dilemma unforeseen in Derrida’s contentions and Marion’s propositions regarding the possibility/impossibility of gift—the consummation of the gift.²⁸ The detrimental nature of hospitality is also

²⁸ Ḥātim also found gratification in publicity and had no qualm about seeking it. He

recognized in the Qurʾān, which warns: “*Keep not your hand gripped to your neck, nor stretch it as far it will reach, lest you sit down, blameworthy, destitute*” (17, 29).

Ibn Ǧinnī was just as familiar with this and other related Qurʾānic verses as he was acquainted with the poetry of al-Mutanabbī, a contemporary poet. This poet, who confessed that “Ibn Ǧinnī is more familiar with my poetry than myself,” said the following in one of his poems: *If you honor the noble you own him, and if you honor the vile he rebels*. It is clear that, in addition to the ruinous aspect of hospitality, this poem, just like the Qurʾān, also indicates an awareness of the calculus and even the tartuferie that can attend acts of hospitality. Yet in no way do they indicate that hospitality is originally pervertible. Rather, hospitality in the Qurʾānic sense is a measure of the man’s perfectibility that is yet to be accomplished. The Qurʾān acknowledges the earthly origin of hospitality and its economy but points it to a different direction, the direction of a self-rewarding praise and worthiness: “*We gave Luqman wisdom, hence he may thank God. He who thanks Allah thanks only himself, and he who denies (kafar), Allah is rich and praiseworthy*” (12, 31). Remarkably, the word for this Qurʾānic directing and guiding is *hidāya*, literally “gift.”

And there stands the stark difference between Ibn Ǧinnī’s idea and ideal of hospitality, the perfection that is yet, to come, and Derrida’s contradictory claim that nothing *is* yet, that which is not is always already perverted, that there *is* no hospitality, but hospitality is already corrupt, which amounts to an assertion of the ontological priority of sin and defect; very un-Islamic.

* * *

But the beauty of Ibn Ǧinnī’s linguistics is the displacement which his grammar was designed to achieve. Going far beyond the concern for verbal correctness and literary propriety, Ibn Ǧinnī’s morpho-phonemic theory was a “grammatological” response to the Islamic philosophical and theological debates relating to genesis and free will going on around him, a point well made by Carter (1991, 125). The origin of speech, the nature of logic, and the function of grammatical categories

is said to have slaughtered three camels for some guest who came only asking for milk. One of the guests was the poet al-Nābiġa l-Dubayānī, in whose poetry Ḥātīm saw the chance for advertisement and a lasting fame (see, *Aġānī*, XVII, 367).



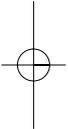
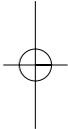
constituted the frontal lines in the intellectual confrontations among Mu‘tazila, Aš‘arites, and Zāhirites, and linguistics could not remain neutral to the ideological claims of various contenders. In this regard, Ibn Ğinnī’s linguistics was more of a philosophical statement about human responsibility than a purely grammatical exercise.

As Carter has indicated, Ibn Ğinnī had a keen understanding of the changing nature of language and its implication for the possibility of doctrinal change in Islam. Indeed, Ibn Ğinnī’s whole linguistics is build on the notion that without change, which, for him, derives from an originary difference or opposition, there can be only a motionless same.

And so, it is rather remarkable that it is Ibn Ğinnī who would uncover intrinsic truths common to the patterns of the voice or the behavior of phonemes and the conduct of humans (ethics and hospitality). Both Ibn Ğinnī and Derrida looked into the structure of language, but whereas Ibn Ğinnī found a clear reference to a human possibility-of-being, Derrida found his ambiguous trace, *différance*, a non-identity that signifies the same, and a sameness which is not identical (*SP*, 129, 133). But speaking a language that favors the distinction between the algebraic value of equality and the grammatical sameness, between the mathematical property ($I = I$) and the copulative proposition *S* is *P*, Ibn Ğinnī never forgot that grammar is, above all, a training for the mind and something to enjoy, a way, as Carter put it, of achieving profundity through playfulness, which is different from Derrida’s play (*jeux*) of *différance*. But this attitude was not unique to Ibn Ğinnī. As Newton Garver has noted in a Preface to Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena*, Ibn Ḥaldūn is another one who “regarded philosophy as frivolous,” language as a “technical habit” (*malaka šinā‘yya*), and grammar and logic as a refinement of rhetoric (*SP*, xi).

Unburdened by the copula of the Aristotelian predication, Ibn Ğinnī spoke and studied a language that does not befall, overwhelm or transform the speaker. It is a language in which, as Massignon put it, ideas may gel into an iron solidity or dissolve into a hyletic effulgence, but “*sans céder sous la prise du sujet parlant qui l’énonce*” (Massignon, 1997, 93). Like Heidegger, Ibn Ğinnī understood that speaking is giving voice to that which is spoken about, and that language “does not bring itself to language,” that it does not speak to itself, without the ever present danger of metaphysics (Heidegger, in *On the Way to Language*, 58-9).

Such is the gift of that Arabic language which also fascinated T. E. Lawrence, who found in it a “universal clearness or hardness of belief, almost mathematical in its limitation, and repellent in its unsympathetic



form" (1935, 38). Such is the language of the Bedouin among whom, another guest, Massignon, found a touch and a communicable awareness of truth ("*ce contact, cette conscience communicable du vrai*"), which allowed him access to a transcendence of the Christian incarnation, which neither Hebrew, nor Greek, nor Latin afforded him in his own religion (Massignon, quoted in Harpigny, 1981, 150). Such is the gift of Bedouinization, the existential experience of which partook Ibrahim, Hagar and Isma'îl, a liberating experience which was renewed by each of the Scriptural Prophets, Moses in the Sinai, Jesus in desert, and Muḥammad among the Banī Sa'd, the tribe of his wet nurse Ḥalīma.

* * *

A French Jew who grew up in Algeria, Derrida called himself *un petit juif noir et très arabe*, "a little black Jew and very Arab" (*Acts of Religion*, 33). "The Abrahamic, in Derrida," as Gil Anidjar said, is a silent hyphen to a complexity of personal, political and theological ties. He speaks of "the fold of the Abrahamic or [Arabized] Ibrahimic moments," and Ishmael was even added to translation of *Donner la mort* (see Anidjar's Introduction to *Acts of Religion*, 10, n. 29, and 19). In *Adieu* (128), Derrida talked about how Islam ought not only be looked at again, but also heard again. In "Faith and Knowledge" (§ 5), he reminded his audience that the surge (*déferlement*) of Islam "will be neither understood nor answered as long as the exterior and interior of this borderline place have not been called into question . . ." (*Acts of Religion*, 145). In addition to investigating the ontotheologico-political tradition that links Greek philosophy to the Abrahamic revelations, Derrida said, "we must also submit to the ordeal of that which resists such interrogation, which will have always resisted, from within or as though from an exteriority that works and resists inside" (*Acts of Religion*, 58).

The problem is that, in his philosophical quest, Derrida insists on an answer to the "unheard-of question" in "unheard-of graphics" (*WD*, 111), whereas, for Islam, the question has always been that of the voice and of listening, of the cry of Isma'îl and the prayer of Hagar²⁹ which

²⁹ It is chocking how dismissive Derrida was when confronted with Fethi Benslama's attempt at deconstructing Biblical figure of Hagar. His response was a mere reference to his prior statement on gift (see Derrida's response in Benslama, 1999). It is all in dire contrast to the level of casuistry to which he descended when dealing with what he called the "nagging an interminable question" of the ruse, or the deception of the blind Jacob to gain his blessing for the younger son (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 94).



were heard at a certain well. The question for Islam is one of hospitality and the hospitable reception of Hagar and Isma'il among the Arabs, the event that changed an act of abandonment into abandon to Allah. The question of reception is also a question of receptivity to the divine truth, the Qur'ān, the voice of *wahy* that resonated through Muḥammad in Arabia.

And this is why, going back to the above-mentioned Kantian question of truth, we find a relationship of mutual reinforcement between hospitality and truthfulness in Islam. As a matter of fact, the duty of hospitality is fulfilled only in truthfulness. Lying may protect the guest but it is violative of honor and there is no dignity in the protection of the cowardly. And for Muslims this is no sheer boastfulness, for the hospitality (i.e., *ḍimma*) and forgiveness of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn are exemplary. And so are the noble gestures of Emir Abdelkader,³⁰ a poet, a teacher and priest, who fought for freedom with honor, surrendered with dignity, and stood in defense of the oppressed Christians and Jews in Damascus, the land of his exile. This *ḍimma* was also honored when Mohammed V stood for the protection of the Jews when he had no protection of his own, while the civilized world sat in idle complicity to a holocaust.

And so is also the Abrahamic sacrifice, a truthfulness that is truly otherwise. In the Qur'ān, the awesome ordeal, the divine burden, is shared equally between father and son. But where the father bore the grief of a prospective loss and the pain of telling his son the truth with fortitude, the son showed even greater resolve, accepting God's will and his father's faith with and equanimity that is beyond all the meta-rhetoric of *The Gift of Death* (77), and the mystical adulations of *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, and *Fear and Trembling*. Yet the whole story is told in a Qur'ānic cameo that gloriously captures that "infinite resignation" which

³⁰ Responding to Mgr. Antoine Pavy who wrote to him thanking him for his intervention to save the lives of thousands of Christians threatened with massacre in Damascus, Emir Abdelkader wrote: *Whatever good we have been able to do for the Christians, we were obliged to do out of fidelity to the Muslim Faith and out of respect for the rights of humanity, because all creatures are the family of God, and those most loved by God are those who are most useful to his family.* (Unpublished letter of 1860, in Ipgrave, 2002, 54). It is only befitting that these heroic acts are immortalized in two paintings, "Emir Abdelkader" by Jean-Baptiste Huysmans, showing Abdelkader protecting the Christians and Jews during the July massacre of 1860, and a painting by Stanislas von Chelbowski showing a reflective Abdelkader (in Lynn Thornton, *Du Maroc aux Indes. Voyages en Orient au XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles*, Paris, ACR Editions, 1998).



Kierkegaard called “peace and rest,” and which in Arabic is simply called Islam (willful surrender): ‘*O my dear son! I have seen in the dream that I should slaughter you, consider then what would be your view.*’ Says the son, ‘*O father, do as thou are bidden, you will find me, God willing, among those who are patient in adversity*’ (37, 102).³¹

* * *

For someone whose philosophy is about the rejection of the ethico-politics of ethnocentrism, Derrida’s comments on the Arabo-Islamic hospitality surely come across as a postmodern variation on the very ethnocentrism which deconstruction is supposed to displace. In his treatment of the Arabo-Islamic hospitality, Derrida remains as Eurocentric as can be, preoccupied with the civic, the urban, the cosmopolitan and the national. Betraying an unquestioned philosophical commitment to the totalizing idea of the Social Contract, Derrida’s deconstruction reads like a raw Weberian sociology,³² untempered by the sympathetic erudition of a Jacques Berque or an Ernest Gellner. The relationships of hospitality which Derrida explores in “Hospitality” tend to be formal, scriptural, written, contractual, and convenantal. The interest in the polis and politeia is also overwhelming in *Of Hospitality*, focusing on alienation and estrangement in Athens as symbolized by Socrates and his plea to his fellow Athenians to try him as a *xenos*. Much the same characterizes *Adieu*, where hospitality is caught up in Kant’s rationalistic

³¹ Nor should we overlook some of the crucial details in this story and their grave importance. Ingeniously, the device of dream is used as a narrative shield between the divine and the human, which is an appropriate measure, capturing the anthropological origin of religion and spirituality, but without sacrificing transcendental of Allah, who sees but is unseen. The story is also told in the context of the Near Eastern practice of human sacrifice, as attested in the Tophet of the Old Testament and, perhaps, that of Carthage. As such, it is a reflection of the time when man began turning away from the cruelty of human immolation, using substitute sacrifice as indicated by the Punic practice of *molchomor*. This, for example, is attested at N’Gaos, Algeria, where the inscription *bsr btm* (‘in exchange of his son’) was found (Ferjaoui, 1993, 405). A similar substitute function of the lamb also underlies the ritual sacrifice of ‘*īd al-adhā*, commemorating an Abrahamic putative human immolation (Achrati, 2003, 172).

³² There is in Weber’s thinking a distinct bent toward exclusiveness, which the editors of *The City*, D. Martindale and G. Neuwirth, tried to minimize, saying that “it is rare in Weber for an unconscious bit of class snobbery to slip into the account” (92, n. 1). One of his exclusivist attempt is the meticulous effort of erecting walls around the settled tribes of ancient Israel, who were surrounded by their enemies, the Bedouins. This distancing of the Bedouin influence is designed to preserve a Biblical ritual purity as a foundation for the ‘urban’ culture of the West (see Bendix, 1962, 207-208).



vision of cosmopolitan principles of law, political rights and bureaucratic justice.

Most troubling is Derrida's assertion that hospitality is founded on an act of hostage-taking, a misconception which, in the violent context of the Near East and its civilizational overtones, can easily lend itself to misinterpretation, good intentions notwithstanding. The proof of this is Derrida himself, who, in the course of demonstrating "the hostage structure" of hospitality, and its "essential and quasi-essential law or antinomy," nonchalantly drew a parallel from the struggle of Chechnya and the practice of hostage-taking by the insurgents in a war, he said he did not know whether it is a civil war or a war of liberation³³ (*Of Hospitality*, 139).

Theologically, and from an Islamic point of view, there is a disturbing sense of guilt, even original sin, which Derrida imports into his conception of hospitality and forgiveness, and which is inconsistent with the Qur'an. Postulated as an a priori debt which is inscribed in forgiveness, this guilt is identified by Derrida with a certain precariousness of being, a fault or "unacquittable debt . . . that is the fact of being there." This precariousness of being Derrida finds articulated in the Nietzschean existent, the Levinasian alterity, and Heidegger's thrownness of Dasein (*Acts of Religion*, 383). But the hold of this guilt is deep in Derrida's thinking, extending even to the mourning of a survivor, which, for him, is nothing but an "a priori guilt for the death of the other," a murderous responsibility (Id., 384).

In Islam, however, as indicated before, hospitality is yet to come, but its meaning is already unfolding. A cursory survey of the meanings of only one single cognate, *krm*, in the Qur'an³⁴ is indicative of the awesome richness of the Qur'anic concept of hospitality. Indeed, *karam* connotes the cosmological ennoblement of man (170, 62); 17, 70;

³³ The Algerian example of colonization is thrown in (*Of Hospitality*, 145-147), but the connection to hospitality of this history of aggression denial are not elucidated.

³⁴ Although it embodies the whole Islamic ethos, the Qur'an is neither a theoretical book of theology, nor does it take up explicit position on the many important ethical questions (Arkoun, 1994, 114; Hourani, 1985, 25). The initial derivation of ethical norms based on scriptural pronouncement was the work of exegetes, jurists and theologian, which partly explains much of the legalism and ritualism that overshadow the religious and institutional life of Muslim individuals and institutions. Still, the commentators and jurists did no more than give "the closest and most faithful interpretation of the Koranic text, grounded in traditional, grammatical, literary and linguistic usage" (Fakhry, 1994, 2; see also Arkoun, 1984, 30-5).





89, 15), grace and bountiful living on earth (89, 15); charity to orphans (89, 17); a kind word (180, 23); hospitality (51, 24); and generosity (12, 21). *Karam* also refers to the Lord (Allah) (82, 6; 96, 3); the Glorious Throne of Allah (23, 116); Divine Honor and Glory (55, 27; 55, 78); the Qur'an itself (56, 77); Scriptures (80, 13); a blissful abode for man (26, 58); a missive, a call to God, from Solomon to Shiba (27, 29); prophetic guidance (44, 17); goodly assistance (4, 31); innocence (70, 16); dignity (25, 72; 49, 13); and scribal record of deeds for Judgment Day (82, 11). Clearly, there is in the semantic vastness of *krm* more than exhausts all the donative powers of Derrida's promise, and Heidegger's givenness, or "gift" of Being, too.³⁵

Most importantaly, hospitality in the Qur'anic sense is a measure of the perfectibility of man, but without this perfectibility being any indication of an inherent defect or fallness in man, be that as a result of an original sin, Dasein's forgetfulness, or any other precariousness of being. Rather, man is an ontological *inter*-mediate, *inter-ess*, capable of both equity and inequity, authenticity and inauthenticity. Man is also ontically a natural (in-the-world), and naturally (*an fitratin*) inclined towards justice and hospitality, but only asymptotically so; for "*to forgo what is due to you is [only] NEARER to righteousness*" (2, 237); and "*an injury is met by its like, but whoso forgives and made peace, his reward is with God*" (42, 40), "*So pardon and forbear*" (5, 13).

* * *

The gap between religion and postmodernism has become narrower, as many writers have sought a theistic appropriation of postmodern themes and adopted their hermeneutics of suspicion and finitude.³⁶ In

³⁵ See, e.g., "Letter on Humanism" (214), where Heidegger says: "*Il y a l'Être*" = there is/it gives [es gibt] Being. This became in *Time and Being* Appropriation, or the event of giving time and Being (see Polt, 1999, 147-148).

³⁶ Indeed, the critique of onto-theology is not directed at the use of philosophical concepts (e.g., omniscience, foreknowledge) to elucidate Scriptural pronouncements, or *what* we say about God. Rather, the critique is directed at *how* we say it, to what purpose, and in the service of what project. As Westphal has indicated, there is no problem for any authentic Jewish, Christian, or Muslim affirmation of God as Creator, as long as such an affirmation is in the service of faith and not the philosophical project of rendering the whole of being intelligible to human understanding (Westphal 2001, 7). It is still possible for theology to seek a nuanced theoretical foundationalism that is, as Thomas M. Kelly put it, "salubriously chastened by postmodernism," incorporating "the broad horizons of historicity, facticity and paradigm-bound rationality even while maintaining the metaphysical or transcendental subject" (M. Kelly, 2002, 8).



its relationship to postmodernism, the Islamic discourse is, to say the least, ambivalent.³⁷ But, as Martin Forward has correctly pointed out, there is every reason for Muslims to ask whether postmodernism is “a more friendly environment than modernism,” a question which, “depends on whether postmodernism is a genuinely new and global phenomenon, which treats all comers on an equal basis, or is simply the tired petering out of the parochial and often inequitable Western concepts of modernity” (Forward, 1998, 129).

As to Derrida’s perspective on Islam and the Arabo-Islamic culture, one can only regret that deconstruction has shown itself to be, in Heidegger’s words, “insufficiently original.”

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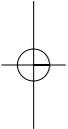
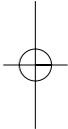
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³⁷ Muslims are generally very reserved, even apprehensive of postmodernism. The fear of postmodernism is well articulated in Akbar (1992, 211), who identifies postmodernism “as the era of the media,” and who openly worries about the power of the postmodernist project and its disruptive effects (211). Reservations are also expressed by M. Arkoun, who finds Derrida’s deconstruction objectionable (Arkoun, 2002, 31-2). Tariq Ramadan is also suspicious of postmodernism, “whose aim,” he thinks, “seems to deny any legitimacy for all reference to a universal ethics” (Ramadan, 2002, 212).

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