Sacrifice and Ethical Responsibility
Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida: Three Perspectives on Singularity and its Conflicted Relationship to Universalism

by
Robyn Lee
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Abstract

Supervisor: Dr. Taneli Kukkonen

In this thesis I explore the relationship between singularity and universalism in the philosophy of Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida. This relationship is paradoxical but not merely oppositional for these three thinkers. Drawing on religious insight, they theorize singularity as a relation to absolute alterity. Singularity involves a demand for individual action, motivated by the encounter with difference. This is an inexhaustible demand, which must be continually re-interpreted through service to the other. Action motivated by responsibility to the other can never be fully justified, involving the individual in an ongoing paradox that cannot be resolved. I explore what this paradox means for ethical and political engagements and what this conception of the unique individual under obligation to the other means for our understanding of society.

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Introduction

In the modern era respect for individuals as equal, autonomous, and sharing in a common humanity has been increasingly grounded in a secular humanism as distinguished from the religious realm. Rather than respecting persons out of duty to God, modern philosophers, notably Immanuel Kant, have attempted to ground ethics in human reason rather than faith. However, contemporary struggles for recognition of difference have opposed such conceptions of humanity on the grounds that they subordinate difference under a universalism that is not actually neutral but rather represents the interests of the dominant group or groups. As well, the secularism of modern liberal states has been accused of implicit antagonism towards religion. Recognition of individuals and groups as existing apart from the universal, neither subordinated under it, nor merely antithetical to it, becomes a pressing concern. In order to address this issue there has been, in the case of many contemporary continental thinkers, a turn towards religion. However, this has been both a return to religion and a turning away from it, because while it re-examines the tradition of religion in order to bring to light new insight, it does not completely abandon the modern tradition of universalism and secularism.

Søren Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Levinas are both deeply religious thinkers; they think religion in new ways that draw on biblical insight but are also resolutely philosophical. Jacques Derrida has written extensively on religion, despite claiming that he can rightly pass for an atheist. These three thinkers treat religion as an integral part of

our world, taking up religious themes and concepts in ways that have important ramifications for how we think about ethics and community. Unlike Kant, they do not merely attempt to think religion within the boundaries of reason alone. Rather, they think about religion in terms of a relation to transcendent alterity, something beyond the limits of the self, towards which the self is oriented without ever being able to fully comprehend. They recognize the importance of reason in interpreting and expressing this alterity, but also that reason cannot completely exhaust it, thereby necessitating endless further interpretations.

In Immanuel Kant's late essay, "On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy", he criticizes those who would elevate mysticism above philosophy, inspiration above the law which one gives to oneself. For Kant, to privilege a mysterious source of knowledge above the rigours of human reason is to threaten the universal category of humanity in my own person, which is in turn the grounds for human freedom and autonomy. Inspiration, on the other hand, provides knowledge without the work of reason, and involves subjection of the human to something other than human. The dictates of practical reason impose themselves upon us: they do not conform to our own personal interests and inclinations. Kant opposes the voice of reason to the voice of the oracle that can lend itself to various interpretations and can therefore be made to serve the interests of those who claim to have privileged access to it.

Kant opposes rational theology to revealed religion. He supports a religion that is entirely compatible with practical reason, upholding precepts which must be taken on faith, but which are demanded by reason. For Kant, a moral law imposes itself upon all humans by virtue of their reason. Human reason commands us to subordinate ourselves

under universalism: it requires that we test our individual maxims according to whether we could will that they become a universal law. This universality depends on an understanding of humans as ends in themselves by virtue of their autonomy, rationality and freedom.

The understanding of reason as universal, objective, and accessible to all by virtue of their common humanity comes under an early attack by Kierkegaard, and in contemporary thought ever more increasingly so. Kierkegaard asserts that philosophy gives priority to universality over particularity, that it understands truth as arising only through the particular being subsumed under or assimilated by the universal. A particularly vocal critic of Hegel, Kierkegaard rejects the attempt to understand truth as a rational totality, or complete system. Instead, Kierkegaard propounds the importance of the unique subject, belying the supposed completeness of the system, and opening up society through critique. Kierkegaard believes that the singular individual develops through religion, through the development of a radically unique subjectivity, which cannot be reduced to the universal.

Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida all treat the topic of singularity, conceived of as radical individuality. Instead of understanding difference as particular instances of the universal, or as capable of being subsumed under a universal, they understand difference as radical uniqueness, incapable of being replicated or transferred. Singularity displaces the old relationship between particular and universal, in which particular instances are examples of a larger universal. With these three thinkers, I will argue, we see a replacement of this binary through the concept of singularity. Singularity does not exist in

a merely oppositional relationship to universality. Rather, the relationship between singularity and universalism is far more complex, rich and problematic.

In response to the distinction that Kant makes between reason and mysticism in "On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy", Derrida contends that reason and religion both stem from the same source, in a relationship to alterity that is neither merely human nor divine.[1] In "Faith and Knowledge" Derrida goes beyond an opposition between reason and religion:

> Religion and reason develop in tandem, drawing from this common resource: the testimonial pledge of every performative, committing it to respond as much *before* the other as *for* the high-performance performativity of technoscience. The same unique source divides itself mechanically, automatically, and sets itself reactively in opposition to itself: whence the two sources in one.[2]

Derrida does not believe that reason and religion can be fully separated from each other, since they both have their source in what is ungrounded and indeterminable. Levinas claims that universal reason has its source in obligation to the other, and Derrida similarly claims that alterity provides the source for all knowledge. Because alterity cannot be fixed by knowledge, the source of knowledge must remain continually elusive. The source of knowledge is singular; it is unique and indeterminate, yet it allows for universal conceptions of right and reason. Kierkegaard also criticizes the search for universally valid truth that abstracts from the uniqueness of the individual. This negates particular passion, and turns concrete selves into mere observers of universal reason.

These three thinkers also all understand singularity as requiring an individual response to the other. The singular individual is not understood as a self-legislating,

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[1]Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy", in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida.*

[2] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge", 66.

autonomous subject, but rather as responding, under obligation, to transcendent alterity or divinity (which is conceived of in different ways by each thinker). Singularity involves a response to what is beyond one's comprehension and radically different from oneself. It thus both imposes a responsibility and provides the impetus for action, which must be carried out within the context of a larger human society (which also imposes its own obligations). Singularity thus is paradoxical, because it is the basis for responsibility to both a transcendent other and to a society of equal individuals.

Kierkegaard opposes Hegel's reconciliation of God with human society. He separated the two by understanding the subject not as merely a particular example of the universal, but rather as capable of transcending the universal and achieving an unmediated relationship with the divine or absolute. This allows for a critical perspective on society from the perspective of singular responsibility. Kierkegaard opposed the loss of individuality that resulted from the abstraction of universalism. He believed that the power of the crowd was increasing, and that the social totality to which individuals belonged was overwhelming personal uniqueness and responsibility.[3] Such a crowd mentality also means that social conformity becomes increasingly valued, and social criticism is stifled. The solution to this, according to Kierkegaard, is to recognize the importance of the individual, and the act of decision-making that defines her. The individual is defined in her uniqueness through her responsibility and ability to transform social institutions.

Emmanuel Levinas understands singularity as obligation to the other; however, he pointedly opposes Kierkegaard by defining this other only as a human being. Levinas

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[3] Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood*, 57.

rejects the idea of obedience to God trumping obligation to other persons. Nonetheless, Levinas' concept of the other contains the trace of transcendence: there is an element of divinity to the other, which compels us to attend to him, as well as a vulnerability that permits us to do violence to him. Although Levinas strenuously criticizes Kierkegaard's endorsement of human sacrifice in the service of God, sacrifice also plays a role in Levinas' thought, as he asserts that the individual is defined by infinite responsibility to the other.

Jacques Derrida has had an ongoing preoccupation with religion and singularity and how difference may be thought in relation to community. Like Levinas, his thought has revolved around responsibility to the other. He thinks about community as based in aporia: it must be open to the other, yet the very act of drawing a boundary, of naming itself as a community, requires exclusion.

A new individual emerges in these three conceptions of singularity that is not subordinate to human society and therefore cannot be understood as a particular instance of the universal. Kierkegaard uses Abraham as an example of a singular individual, who is willing to sacrifice his son at God's command. Sacrifice and singularity have an important connection in Kierkegaard's thought, as well as in that of Levinas and Derrida, who alternately react against and draw from Kierkegaard. Singularity is in all three cases founded upon obligation to alterity, although they understand alterity in differing ways.

Universally applicable moral law is ultimately subordinated to an ethical obligation based on difference, rather than on common humanity. For Kierkegaard this obligation is owed to God, the absolutely transcendent other, with the result that

singularity represents a 'teleological suspension' of the ethical.[4] Levinas and Derrida, however, attempt to rethink singularity as inherently ethical because it is defined by obligation to the other person. In all three cases, singularity is thought of as a form of subjectivity directed away from the self. As well, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son at God's command haunts all three accounts of singularity. Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida all struggle with the problem of how to reconcile absolute responsibility to the other with universalized responsibility to all persons, theorizing this in various conflicted ways.

Because singularity is based on responsibility and is directed towards the other, it requires a re-thinking of community. Since individuation occurs through responsibility to what is other, the divide between autonomous action and the social becomes ambiguous. How are we to think about our relationships with other people in the light of absolute difference between us? According to Levinas, it is of the utmost importance to ask: "Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequences of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship?"[5] Is universalism necessary to ensure peace in society, or does it violate the ethical demand to maintain and respect the radical uniqueness of others? With the three thinkers under examination, we see that universalism both flows from and interrupts singular obligation.

Theorizing a relationship between singularity and universality can lead to complex but potentially transformative effects on ethics and politics. Kierkegaard,

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[4] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.
[5] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 80.

Levinas and Derrida share a preoccupation with aporia. The singular responsibility to the other is absolute and requires infinite effort; and yet, there remains obligation to everyone in human society. How do we reconcile this tension? Perhaps a better question, one which these three thinkers ask, is how do we deepen this tension, how do we fully realize it in order to always interrupt ourselves and always remain in the active state of decision-making which ethics and politics require.

Chapter 1

Kierkegaard's Paradox: Sacrificing Ethics

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard poses the question whether faith is higher than ethics. Such a question might seem anathema to any sort of ethics; however, according to Kierkegaard's account faith may have important, albeit thorny, implications for ethics. Kierkegaard identifies faith with singularity and ethics with universalism, equating them with different stages in an individual's development. Singularity and universalism are not unrelated for Kierkegaard, although he distinguishes between them as two different stages of life. They have a paradoxical relationship to each other, but this paradox does not mean that either universalism or singularity represents the mere negation of the other.

Analyzing the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac in his *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard explores why Abraham would have obeyed God's command to sacrifice his son. Abraham's obedience to God rested solely on faith because killing his son, whom he loved dearly, seemed to contradict all ethical judgement. How could God possibly command such a horrendous act and why would Abraham be valorized as the 'father of faith' for his willingness to commit filicide? De Silentio, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, describes faith as "the paradox of life and existence".[6] The paradox of faith is that one must renounce everything and simultaneously believe that by virtue of the absurd one will get it all back. Kierkegaard believes Abraham exemplifies this paradox and thus is the paradigm of faith. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son at the command of God but through his faith believed that his son would be returned to him. This paradoxical faith is torturous, resulting in the 'fear and trembling' of the believer. There is no sure footing anywhere because this faith contradicts all reason and moral

[6]Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 58.

virtue. Abraham makes an intensely private decision when he obeys God, setting himself apart from all of human society, who have no way of comprehending his actions.

In his works, Kierkegaard describes life as involving a series of stages, which consist primarily of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Through Kierkegaard's stages of life subjectivity is developed and the individual transformed but Kierkegaard stresses that each stage depends upon the previous stage(s). The first stage, the aesthetic, represents the distinguishing of self from others. Before this there is an incomplete distinction between an individual and her surrounding environs. With the advent of the second, ethical stage, the individual recognizes herself within the universal; she sees that as a particular individual she is represented by the universal subject, and ethics can thereby develop. De Silentio writes that "the particular individual is the individual who has his *telos* in the universal, and his ethical task is to express himself constantly in it, to abolish his particularity in order to become the universal."[7] In the religious realm the individual is no longer defined by her community as in the ethical realm. The religious individual can no longer find herself within the universal. No longer either identifying herself in opposition to or as participating in society, she transcends society, engaging in a private relationship with God. Abraham is, for Kierkegaard, the paradigmatic example of the religious individual and attaining faith requires following Abraham's example.

The new subjectivity developed in the religious realm is singular because it cannot be represented by a universal subject. Rather, it is what cannot be expressed by any universal. In the religious realm, the subject is no longer involved in reciprocal relations with other people because this new subject is radically different from the

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[7] *Fear and Trembling*, 64.

generalized self with which all ethical persons identify. The religious or singular individual is radically different from every other individual, so much so that her singularity cannot be expressed in terms comprehensible to anyone else. The singular individual is turned inward, but not in the purely egoistic sense of the aesthete who is concerned only for her own enjoyment and amusement. Rather, the singular individual is turned inward so as to develop her personal relationship with God. She is concerned above all with herself, but this 'self' has changed in its meaning. Self now means above all 'in relation to God'.

The intermediary stage between the aesthetic and religious stages means that although outwardly they appear similar the two are inwardly extremely different since the religious individual has moved through the intermediary stage of the universal. The aesthetic stage is prior to the recognition and inculcation of one's ethical responsibility to others in society. The aesthete is concerned only with himself. The religious individual is concerned with his own private relationship with and duty to God, but he also recognizes his ethical responsibility to others. The religious realm is purely private and yet can only come after the public universal, thus the "paradox of faith is this, that there is an inwardness, be it observed, which is not identical with the first but is a new inwardness."[8]

[8] *Fear and Trembling*, 79.

Kierkegaard's Understanding of Ethics

What might be the ethical implications of Kierkegaard's concept of singularity? Kierkegaard understands ethics to be universal: the "ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which may be expressed from another point of view by saying that it applies every instant... the particular individual is the individual who has his telos in the universal, and his ethical task is to express himself constantly in it, to abolish his particularity in order to become the universal."[9] However, for Kierkegaard the ethical is not the highest life.

De Silentio writes in *Fear and Trembling* of Abraham's 'teleological suspension of the ethical'. The ethical is suspended for the sake of the religious, but this is a teleological suspension of the ethical, and not its termination since Isaac is spared by God and Abraham descends Mount Moriah to rejoin society. The telos here is the development of Abraham's subjectivity into a form which is both intensely private and absolutely directed outwards, towards the absolutely other. The singularity that is developed is something both more and less than a self in our conventional understanding; it is entirely submissive to God, and yet willing to undertake God's will *for his own sake*, as well as for God's. This is what makes Abraham the father of faith, but this does not mean that with faith comes unconcern for others. Abraham is still concerned for the well-being of his beloved son, even though he is willing to sacrifice him at God's command. If Abraham were willing to sacrifice his son out of anger or even indifference his action would not have been praiseworthy. He must rather love his son more than any other man loves his son in order for his action to constitute an appropriate sacrifice for God.

[9] *Fear and Trembling*, 64-5.

Abraham "overstepped the ethical entirely and possessed a higher telos outside of it, in relation to which he suspended the former."[10] The ethical does not disappear. Although Abraham's action in accordance with God's command was completely private and thus had no relationship to universal ethics, his action would not be justified unless Abraham was first of all, and more than other men, ethical. It is only if Abraham truly loves his son Isaac and thereby carries out his ethical duty as a father to love his son, that he can transcend the ethical and move to an unmediated relationship with God. Only because Abraham loves his son more than any other man is his willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God's command so impressive. It is not by doing away with but by transcending the ethical that Abraham must recognize that his own personal relationship with God is higher than his relationship with his son. Isaac's murder/sacrifice is in no way good, but so long as Abraham maintains the contradiction between his ethical duty and his overwhelming duty to God, it is not evil either. This transcendence of the ethical does not result in a higher unity of the ethical and the religious. The contradiction between the ethical and the religious is maintained, for without this contradiction Abraham's action loses its specific meaning. Without continuing to recognize the responsibility to his son that ethics imposes upon him, Abraham would have ceased his fear and trembling; his obedience to God would have lost its paradoxical character and so would have been rendered far less demanding.

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[10] *Fear and Trembling*, 69.

How Does Kierkegaard Understand Universalism?

Kierkegaard's privileging of singularity represents an opposition to universal ethics. However, if Kierkegaard is to maintain the paradoxical relation of singularity and universalism then it would seem that his opposition to universal ethics is not going to be altogether straightforward. Although Kierkegaard explicitly criticized Hegelian universal ethics I will also discuss Kant's universal ethics as an alternate example of the subordination of religion to rationality. First I will treat Kierkegaard's understanding of singularity in relation to a generally Kantian universal ethic which is interior and reason-directed. Secondly I will look at Kierkegaard's opposition to a public, social, generally Hegelian universalism.

Kant removes the unsettling power of religion by using faith as the foundation of a rational moral system. With faith safely defanged, he also removes the emphasis on interiority and faith's personal character by privileging the universal law over individuality. Kierkegaard reintroduces interiority and the personal character of faith through his postulation of religion as a realm beyond the ethical. Religion is truly unsettling for Kierkegaard because it rescinds all external justification for one's actions.

Kant postulates three tenets of faith in order to ground his ethics: the existence of God, human freedom and human immortality.[11] These tenets, which cannot be proven rationally, are practically necessary for Kant's ethics. The supreme principle of his ethics is the categorical imperative: act only according to that maxim which you can at the same

[11]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 159.

time will that it should become a universal law.[12] The categorical imperative requires that moral conduct may be universally applied.

Kant's universal ethics requires that virtue and inclination be opposed to each other in order for actions to be moral. The "moral law, as a determining principle of the will, must by thwarting all our inclinations produce a feeling which may be called pain."[13] Without conflict between morality and natural inclination, the moral law would always be external. Only when morally correct actions are undertaken solely because they are morally correct can true moral disposition be developed. According to Kant, we must postulate a Supreme Being that contains the harmony of morality and natural desire. It is "morally necessary to assume the existence of God."[14] God is moral without conflict because he is incapable of willing anything that is not in accordance with the moral law. We, however, are incapable of God's holiness because our natural desires prevent the complete harmonization of desire and morality.[15] At best we can act in accordance with the moral law but can never be certain that we are acting purely *from* duty.

The relation between universal ethics and singularity may be contradictory, even paradoxical, as we see in Kierkegaard's writings. Their relation may also draw on the complex relationship between philosophy and religion. The distinction between universalism and singularity, as between philosophy and religion, is not as clear as it might first appear, though. Kant's universal ethics also depend on faith, although Kant

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[12] *Critique of Practical Reason*, 46.
[13] *Critique of Practical Reason*, 93.
[14] *Critique of Practical Reason*, 152.
[15] *Critique of Practical Reason*, 102-4.

believes that the precepts which ethics rest on must be taken on faith because they cannot be proven but they are nonetheless compatible with reason.

Kant's universal ethics show some similarity to Kierkegaard's characterization of ethics. Kant describes ethics as constituting our duty to God: "To love God means...to do his commandments."[16] Kierkegaard does not claim that it is only the religious realm which is divine; he does describe ethics as "the universal, and as such it is again the divine."[17] But if ethics is the entirety of our duty to God, if our duty to God is nothing more than our duty to our fellow human beings and what our reason dictates, then this renders the concept of duty to God meaningless, or at the very least superfluous. For Kant, it would be impossible for God to command something immoral. For Kierkegaard this is possible because if all our worldly duties are duties to God, then this means there is no such thing, effectively speaking, as a specific duty to God at all. Thus for Kierkegaard our duty to God must entail something beyond the dictates of our reason; it must involve a relation with God that is not purely rational. Kant would think this sheer fanaticism.[18] For Kierkegaard ethical duty cannot be the whole of our duty to God because duty "becomes duty by being referred to God, but in duty itself I do not come into relation with God."[19] Faith ought not to be reduced to morality but requires, in addition, that the individual enter into a private relation with God. With faith, there is the development of interiority that is separate from public or moral virtue. For Kierkegaard duty to God has two aspects: faith is a singular obligation to God, whereas ethics is a universal duty to God carried out in the context of honouring obligations that are rationally determined and

[16] *Critique of Practical Reason*, 104.
[17] *Fear and Trembling*, 78.
[18] *Critique of Practical Reason*, 106.
[19] *Fear and Trembling*, 78.

that further the social good. However, God seems to be commensurate with the universal for Kant, whereas for Kierkegaard it is not sufficient for God to be identified with our universal, ethical duty.

As Robert L. Perkins points out, both Kant and Kierkegaard make a fundamental distinction between faith and knowledge.[20] Kant's ethics cannot rely on knowledge alone, since the three underlying postulates of his ethics must be taken on faith. Despite this, there is no conflict between faith and knowledge for Kant since the precepts of faith are rationally intelligible. Kierkegaard also maintains that God cannot be rationally known. There is no direct relation to God in the ethical realm and the religious realm is beyond human understanding. Kant attempted to reconcile religion and philosophy, but he did so by subordinating faith to reason. He argued that faith could be stripped of its revelatory elements and its fundamental tenets used to ground a rational ethics. He defines ethical action as following the dictates of universal moral law in preference to personal inclination. Personal inclinations are necessary to morality insofar as they form, together with reason, the opposition that morality depends on, but in order to be ethical, one must follow rational duty rather than personal inclination. This subordination of personal inclination to universal moral law is analogous to Kierkegaard's description of the progress of an individual from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage. In becoming ethical, one subordinates personal inclination to universal duty. The aesthetic individual persists in the ethical, but only as a particular example of a universal.

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[20] Robert L. Perkins, "For Sanity's Sake: Kant, Kierkegaard, and Father Abraham", in *Kierkegaard's* Fear and Trembling*: Critical Appraisals*, 44.

The Fear and Trembling of Singularity

In faith there can be no recourse to the structures and judgements of society. Thus it represents a movement beyond the social universal Hegel identified as the working out of Spirit. Hegel presents a conception of universal ethics that differs from Kant's. For Hegel, morality depends on participation in society rather than upon abstract reason. This form of universal ethics is public, and in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard privileges privacy over publicity. Kierkegaard is reacting against Hegelian universalism by positing the singularity of faith that transcends the social.[21] He asserts that "Hegelian philosophy holds that there is no justified concealment, no justified incommensurability."[22] In opposition to this, Kierkegaard holds that there can in fact be justified concealment and incommensurability. Silence can be justified by the individual being higher than the universal and communication with other people becomes impossible with the onset of faith. Singularity is a secret, private thing. Although it requires absolute submission and obedience, yet "the essence of faith is to be a secret, to be for the single individual; if it is not preserved as a secret by each individual, even when he professes it, he believes not at all."[23]

Singularity is a terrifying experience because it submits one to 'fear and trembling' from which there is no relief. There is no external moral authority to appeal to and Abraham can never be certain that he has correctly interpreted God's command. The

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[21] See Mark C. Taylor's *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* for a sensitive analysis of Kierkegaard's complex relation to Hegel. Taylor astutely draws out how Kierkegaard is not merely a critic of Hegel's, but also relies on him in important ways.
[22] *Fear and Trembling*, 92.
[23] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 43.

"relief of speech is that it translates me into the universal."[24] This relief is no longer available once the ethical realm is transcended; in fact, speech becomes a temptation that the knight of faith must resist. Whereas the tragic hero, as the expression of ethical conduct, has the satisfaction of justifying his actions in the public realm and enjoying the approval of rational members of his society, the knight of faith has no such relief because he is unable to communicate his intentions. The knight of faith has no judge of his conduct other than himself and he is in constant fear that his faith is a delusion and he is really only a murderer. Although his relationship to God cannot be communicated to others the ethical requirement to speak persists, and the knight of faith is therefore gripped in a constant paradox. Silence is "the snare of the demon, and the more one keeps silent the more terrifying the demon becomes; but silence is also the mutual understanding between the Deity and the individual."[25] The knight of faith is caught between both aspects of silence; speech is demanded by ethics but is also a temptation.

For Kierkegaard singularity has two aspects: the singularity of the subject and the singularity of the other. Abraham is a singular subject because he has moved beyond a universal ethical framework and thereby privileges his responsibility to God above all else. He is thus beyond comprehension and unintelligible in the public realm. The singular other to whom Abraham submits is also beyond comprehension. Only Abraham has this uniquely personal relationship with God. God's command is made to Abraham alone; the relationship between Abraham and God is completely private. The obligation

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[24] *Fear and Trembling*, 122.
[25] *Fear and Trembling*, 97.

Abraham owes to God is also beyond comprehension and cannot be expressed in language or in a rationally comprehensible manner.

God's command to sacrifice Isaac is made to Abraham alone. Abraham is the only one to hear the command, and it is only Abraham who is capable of recognizing his duty to God and the necessity of carrying out the command. This contrasts with the example given in *Fear and Trembling* of the bridegroom who hears from heaven that misfortune will result from his marriage.[26] De Silentio points out that it makes a difference both whether the bridegroom speaks publicly about having received this prophecy, and whether the prophecy is made publicly or to the bridegroom alone. Abraham's communication from God differs from the bridegroom's divine augur because what Abraham hears from God is for Abraham alone. The trial that he is commanded to undergo is for his own sake, as well as for God's sake. Abraham's command is intended for Abraham alone. This command is not ethical because it is not intended to promote general well-being, but is directed only at the development of Abraham's own private interiority.

C. Stephen Evans states that he does not understand the difference between the bridegroom and Abraham's divine communication.[27] He presumes that the difference between the two rests on some sort of private language, but in fact the difference does not depend upon failure to translate linguistic meaning, but rather upon the distinction between what can be spoken of and what cannot be spoken at all. The ethical demand to speak and have actions judged by society cannot be fulfilled by the knight of faith

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[26] *Fear and Trembling*, 98-103.
[27] C. Stephen Evans, "Is the Concept of an Absolute Duty to God Morally Unintelligible?" in *Kierkegaard's* Fear and Trembling*: Critical Appraisals*, 141-151.

because his intentions transcend the ethical and the rational. Singularity presupposes that there is something beyond comprehension and which therefore cannot be expressed in language. The bridegroom hears that misfortune is to result after his marriage but this is universally intelligible since anyone can understand and be concerned to avoid misfortune. On the other hand, Abraham's communication from God and his carrying out of God's command contradicts all good outcomes. It will harm everyone if he kills Isaac, including himself. In another way, though, Abraham's obedience is for his own benefit as well as God's since Abraham's subjectivity is being trained in a radically new way. A new kind of interiority results from recognizing a duty to God that transcends reason and morality. This interiority contradicts morality, which must be directed towards some concrete good.

Levinas' and Derrida's Divergent Interpretations of Kierkegaard

Although I have argued that Kierkegaard does not actually do away with ethics in positing something beyond ethics, namely faith, Kierkegaard certainly privileges the relationship of the singular individual with God over relationships between human beings. Emmanuel Levinas objects strenuously to what he sees as Kierkegaard's relativizing of ethics by positing faith as transcending ethics.[28] Levinas believes that singularity belongs not in faith alone but in ethics. Levinas objects to Kierkegaard's demarcation between ethics as general and religion as singular because he believes that

[28] Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names.*

ethics is both general and singular.[29] Arguing that Kierkegaard's description of the movement from universality to singularity is backwards, Levinas instead understands this movement to begin from singularity, in which the subject is uniquely responsible for the other, and move towards universalism, in which one must make judgements as a result of all of one's unique and irreplaceable obligations to every human being.

Levinas argues that Kierkegaard's private relation of man to God is violent because it refuses all exteriority, all relation to other human beings. Thus, he objects to the violence of Kierkegaard's thought in elevating absolute duty to God above duty to other humans. For Levinas, it is not the subject who disrupts totality, but the other to whom she is ethically responsible. In fact, Levinas does not treat ethics and faith as being in opposition to each other, but like Kant, considers the two to be equivalent.[30]

Although he claims not to disagree with Levinas' understanding of ethics, Derrida is nevertheless far less critical of Kierkegaard than Levinas.[31] Derrida does not perceive a dangerous separation between universal ethics and singular religion because he reads Kierkegaard as placing singularity back in the ethical. Derrida states that we are all Abrahams since each decision we make is caught in the same sort of aporia Abraham experienced in which our singular obligation to the other must be compared to general obligations to everyone else. Thus according to Derrida there is no ethical generality that is not paradoxical. Any time I enter into a relation with any other, I must always sacrifice my general responsibilities to everyone in order to attend to the specific needs of that other. In attending to any one individual's needs we must always fail to attend to the

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[29] How Levinas understands ethics as both general and singular will be the subject of chapter two.
[30] Catherine Chalier, *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas*, 158.
[31] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*.

needs of others. Derrida believes that Kierkegaard's absolute duty is present in our every action and describes ethics as consisting of the paradoxical "contradiction between responsibility in general and absolute responsibility."[32] Derrida equates Kierkegaard's characterization of the singular relation with God with the ethical decisions which we must make every moment of our lives.

Both Levinas and Derrida wish to expand Kierkegaard's notion of the ethical to include singularity. In place of demarcated stages of universal ethics and singular faith, they opt for an integration of the two without collapsing the distinction between them. Derrida interprets Kierkegaard's thought as possessing such an expanded conception of the ethical, whereas Levinas criticizes Kierkegaard for not having it. For both Levinas and Derrida, though, 'God' is to be found in ethics. There is no personal God as Kierkegaard believes there to be for the knight of faith, though. God for Levinas and Derrida is merely that trace of transcendence that can be found within our ethical relations to others, and which is only ever present as an absence. Both Levinas and Derrida argue that ethics includes both universalism and singularity, though Derrida believes Kierkegaard shares this view while Levinas does not. However, for both Levinas and Derrida this means that there is nothing beyond the ethical. Faith is not the radically unique phenomenon for them that it is for Kierkegaard. Like Kant, it seems that for Levinas and Derrida ethics can include all of religion, although the conception of ethics Levinas and Derrida hold is amorphous and boundless, without the prescribed limits Kant establishes.

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[32] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 61.

The Paradox of Faith

Whereas for Kant, ethics requires that inclination and duty be opposed, in Kierkegaard's religious sphere it appears that this opposition is no longer necessary. In Abraham's case, virtue and inclination are reconciled since it is both Abraham's duty to spare his son's life, and it is also what he desires as a loving father. De Silentio writes that "religion is the only power which can deliver the aesthetical out of its conflict with the ethical."[33] With religion it is no longer necessary for virtue and inclination to be opposed to each other; they both must be opposed to faith in order for the absurd paradox of faith to exist. Thus the contradiction between virtue and inclination is resolved only with the establishment of a greater contradiction between both of these and the requirements of faith.

Subjectivity is further disciplined with the onset of faith, beyond the opposition between virtue and inclination that Kant considered necessary to morality. The religious individual is no longer a completely autonomous moral agent. Faith changes agency, with freedom becoming understood as voluntary submission to God. The focus is no longer, as with Kant's universal moral agent, on the self-legislation of reason; nor is it on participation in society as with Hegel. This is a different kind of subjectivity in which one submits to the absolute rather than the universal. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son "for God's sake, and (in complete identity with this) for his own sake. He did it for God's sake because God required this proof of his faith; for his own sake he did it in order that he might furnish the proof."[34] Abraham, in becoming a singular individual, paradoxically

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[33] *Fear and Trembling*, 103.
[34] *Fear and Trembling*, 70.

seems to be the least free of the three main forms of subjectivity. In gaining pure interiority, he must give up both the free inclination of the aesthetic realm and the free exercise of virtue of the ethical realm.

The singularity that is beyond universal law is radically individual but only by being simultaneously supremely committed to servitude. The singular individual is not free to transgress behind the veil of secrecy that obscures her motivations. Rather, this individual is more securely bound than even the ethical individual who assimilates herself to the universal. Within ethics, the individual still can find herself within the universal, but the subjectivity of the singular individual consists only of a commitment that goes against all of her inclinations, both personal and universal. De Silentio writes that while "he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself, he who loves God believingly reflects upon God."[35] Thus, the most extreme interiority is also the most directed away from oneself. This development of subjectivity moves first beyond the individual in isolation, transcending the aesthetic realm, then away from the individual as realized in society, transcending the ethical realm. The singular individual, by embracing the paradox of faith, is purely private in her direct relationship with a God who is completely other, but to whose will she subjects herself entirely.

De Silentio writes of the teleological suspension of the ethical in the religious sphere but the ethical is not merely eliminated. Universalism is a necessary precondition to singularity, but it is not merely a precondition because the ethical persists even with the advent of faith. Because religion is beyond ethics it is also beyond any ethical judgement. Although from an ethical standpoint we can judge Abraham's actions as

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[35] *Fear and Trembling*, 47.

immoral, this judgement is not truly legitimate because Abraham has transcended ethics. The contradiction between both Abraham's duty and his inclination which are united in wishing to spare Isaac's life, and the command of God, constitutes the paradox in which the ethical must be transcended. Universal, ethical duty is not done away with since this would negate the paradox of faith. The universal must remain, or there can be no incommensurability between it and the religious realm and this incommensurability is required for faith.

While Kierkegaard does hold singularity and universalism together in a certain kind of relationship, this is necessarily paradoxical because the two are radically different. While Derrida provides a reading of Kierkegaard that might assuage the objections that Levinas raises against him, Kierkegaard nevertheless remains a deeply problematic thinker because of his emphasis on faith. Why would two thinkers with as much in common as Levinas and Derrida disagree so strongly in their readings of Kierkegaard? Levinas is quite right to point out the danger and violence inherent in Kierkegaard's separation of religion from ethics and of singularity from universality. But Derrida brings out how, in a deeper way, Kierkegaard can be seen to hold these contradictory elements together. Although Levinas is correct in seeing that Kierkegaard holds them to be contradictory, in a certain sense Kierkegaard nonetheless maintains a relation between them.

If it is possible to speak of a singularity which cannot be adequately judged from the perspective of universal ethics, but which is not simply the negation of universal ethics, we appear to enter a paradox. How can singularity simultaneously be beyond ethics and yet not be entirely unethical? For if, as Kierkegaard argues, both the ethical

and the religious are divine, and yet they contradict each other, how can this be understood? Is there a way to understand Kierkegaard as holding together universalism and singularity that does not require collapsing religion into ethics as it seems Kant, Levinas and Derrida all do, albeit in very different ways?

For Kierkegaard, faith is a paradox that cannot be mediated because it is founded on the individual being only the individual and *not* the expression of the universal, which is the founding precondition for the ethical. Faith is higher than society, although society is required in order to develop an individual capable of transcending it. Mirroring the statement in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* that paradox is the passion of thought[36] we may perhaps understand singularity as the passion of the universal. This does not imply that singularity is the culmination of universality but rather that universalism is not enough if we are to allow that not all intentions can or should be expressed. If we are to make room for anything that may not be rationally known or anything that exceeds our comprehension then we ought not to assume that "the whole of existence of the human race is rounded off completely like a sphere, and the ethical is at once its limit and its content."[37] In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus states that if "the Paradox and the Reason come together in a mutual understanding of their unlikeness their encounter will be happy."[38] The contradiction between the paradox of faith and reason does not necessarily negate reason, though in faith reason approaches a limit that is beyond its comprehension. Analogously, neither does singularity negate universalism. In following God's command,

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[36] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*, 46.
[37] *Fear and Trembling*, 78.
[38] *Philosophical Fragments*, 61.

Abraham moves beyond society and ascends Mount Moriah willing to commit the most heinously unethical act imaginable. This singularity is devoted to something beyond understanding and it subsequently understands its own goals as being identical to the incomprehensible goals of the absolute.

Singularity thus appears to represent a movement beyond dichotomies of self and society into a subjectivity that is unmediated by universal categories of selfhood. Kierkegaard's singular individual is no longer the autonomous moral agent of Kant's universalism, nor the social citizen of Hegel's. She is no longer the aesthetic self defining herself against society, nor the ethical self identifying with a universal subject. The religious self suspends relation with society. However, this also constitutes absolute subjection to what is other than oneself, society, and reason. The 'absolute relation to the absolute' that comes about through a personal relationship with God does not eliminate previous relations to one's particularity and universality. In a sense, it returns one to them, but in a way unmediated by universal categories. The knight of faith reclaims the finite and is perfectly at home in it but is no longer subject to it, having made the movement of infinite resignation and now reclaiming the finite by virtue of the absurd.[39] Kant's ethics only find their final reward with immortality since in finite lifetimes virtue cannot be finally united with happiness. Kierkegaard refers, though, only to finite existence, in which his ethical individual does not attain happiness either. De Silentio describes ethics' tragic hero as having made the infinite movement of resignation, but as not being able to believe that he will get back what he has given up. This is what makes the knight of faith so distinctive, because he does believe that by virtue of the absurd he

[39] *Fear and Trembling*, 50-1.

will get back what he has sacrificed.[40] The movement beyond the ethical changes the boundaries of the self: it becomes more precarious and tensile, directed entirely at the absolute and thereby regaining the finite.

Kierkegaard claims that faith is beyond philosophy because it transcends language and reason. But the knight of faith returns from Mount Moriah. De Silentio writes that faith "after having made the movements of infinity, it makes those of finiteness."[41] Only the knight of faith can express the sublime in the pedestrian.[42] It is after all a teleological *suspension* of the ethical that is under examination, not a complete denial of it, and it seems that there is something about the ethical that bears returning to. Perhaps Derrida is justified in describing Kierkegaard as reintegrating singularity into universalism, since the singular individual is able to return most completely to society without experiencing any loss. At any rate, it does not seem that the ethical could be quite the same upon Abraham's return as when he left it. Although the knight of faith appears from an external view to be just like any other person, he is nonetheless radically different internally. For even when Abraham returns from Mount Moriah with his son, his experience would be difficult, if not impossible, to describe in terms that would be comprehensible to a society of ethical individuals. And yet Kierkegaard describes it for us and even gives us theoretical contexts in which to consider the story.

Although Kierkegaard may not be doing philosophy in the same universally comprehensible way as Kant or Hegel, his attention to the paradox of faith does not mean that he is not doing philosophy at all. Rather, it appears that in attempting to describe the

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[40] *Fear and Trembling*, 51.
[41] *Fear and Trembling*, 48.
[42] *Fear and Trembling*, 52.

impossible paradox of singularity we may understand Kierkegaard to describe an aspect of life all human beings may potentially experience. Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard affords us a richer understanding of universalism in which we recognize that there are inevitably gaps or blind spots that are not to be filled in or known but which are intrinsically a part of any universal. The universal may no longer be seen as a totality but as fragmented by all of the singular viewpoints that constitute it. As Derrida points out, insofar as Kierkegaard is a philosopher he is not engaging in an egoistic discourse, as Levinas fears, but rather, that the "name of a philosophical subject, when he says *I*, is always, in a certain way, a pseudonym."[43] In Kierkegaard's case, he is a philosophical subject who is explicitly always a pseudonym. Kierkegaard's use of diverse personal accounts of pseudonymous writers to describe universal human nature appears compatible with Levinas' view that we must not begin with universality but "rather move toward it, beginning with the moral uneasiness elicited by individual lives."[44] Importantly, Kierkegaard thereby shows us that the universal is not the limit of human existence. Kierkegaard writes, "Faith is a miracle, and yet no man is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and faith is a passion."[45]

Perhaps Kierkegaard's account of Abraham may be interpreted as a gap or suspension within philosophy that must be thought through with the assistance of paradox, but not a final abandonment of philosophy. The fact that the poet de Silentio is able to describe Abraham's situation at all, though he cannot make it comprehensible to us, points to the possibility of attempting to express the inexpressible and even the

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[43] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, 110.
[44] Chalier, *What Ought I to Do?*, 34.
[45] *Fear and Trembling*, 77.

necessity of doing so, since the stages of life that Kierkegaard outlines are meant to be imitated. Faith is the "highest thing and it is dishonest of philosophy to give something else instead of it and to make light of faith. Philosophy cannot and should not give faith, but it should understand itself and what it has to offer and take nothing away."[46] While philosophy is unable to express faith, it nonetheless has an important role. Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard reflects this gap or absence within the universal, in which the opacity of singularity disturbs the transparency of philosophy. Hent De Vries describes this as a double bind which haunts Derrida's writings in which being "responsible demands a double response or allegiance to the general and the singular, to repetition and to the unique, to the public sphere and to the secret, to discourse and silence, to giving reasons as well as to madness, each of which tempts the other."[47]

Kierkegaard and Community

Merold Westphal points out in *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* that Kierkegaard "seeks to un-socialize the individual in order to un-deify society."[48] As a result of Abraham's journey up Mount Moriah there is a loosening up or an opening within the universal. The singular individual is in a sense dislocated in relation to the universal. While she still recognizes the demand of ethics, her judgement is no longer subordinated to the universal standpoint but has been enriched to include the possibility of demands that are unmediated by the universal. There can be no final justification, either moral or political, by appeal to the universal in this case. Rather, the universal is

[46] *Fear and Trembling*, 44.
[47] Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*, 175.
[48] Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, 34.

undermined by the singularity of the individuals who participate in it. Having gone past the ethical realm, one cannot return to it in the same manner as before. Abraham's motivations and actions are not transparent to other individuals in society. Ethics can never have the same supremacy that it had before it was suspended.

Mark Dooley also argues that Kierkegaard ultimately has a renewed understanding of society as a result of the journey up Mount Moriah. Rather than doing away with universalism, the suspension of ethics allows for the critique of ethics, from the standpoint of a singularly responsible individual. In response to Levinas's critique of Kierkegaard, Dooley contends that Kierkegaard does hold an ethics of singularity.[49] According to Dooley, Kierkegaard is not against the ethical, but is rather looking for a way in which the ethical can become self-critical. It is possible to understand Kierkegaard as reintegrating the religious sphere of existence into the universal sphere, with the knight of faith, having gained the infinite, being able to perfectly recreate the movements of the finite.

In his *Works of Love* Kierkegaard explores love of the neighbour, possibly attenuating Levinas' criticism of his over-emphasis on subjectivity, above ethical responsibility to the other. In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard describes singularity as being in community. Singularity is representative of a shared human state and because of this, Elsebet Jugstrup argues, it involves a relation to the other, and the idea of community thus grows out of singularity, rendering singularity responsible.[50] The author of *Works of Love* appears far closer to Levinas' position, in understanding love to mean obligation,

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[49] Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility.*
[50] Elsebet Jugstrup, "A Questioning of Justice: Kierkegaard, the Postmodern Critique", 430.

taking heed of the biblical injunction to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. Although Kierkegaard allows duty to God to trump ethical duty to fellow human beings, in *Works of Love* obedience to God is described as inspiring love of the neighbour. Kierkegaard believes love of others is necessary, and requires a step beyond mere duty. Such a love recognizes the difference of every individual, but still sees all as equals. It requires going beyond preferential attitudes towards people, and the cultivation of proximity to exteriority, that is, to radical difference.

Usage of Kierkegaard's Singularity

To entertain the possibility of something beyond universalism is certainly dangerous. The ethical law that prevents individuals from harming each other is suspended, apparently opening up the potential for filicide, among other evils. It also, however, allows us to be responsible for others without requiring that we understand them and does not require people to give an account of their actions and motivations when to do so is impossible in universally comprehensible terms. Kierkegaard believes that the development beyond ethics to faith is extremely difficult, and may constitute a leap that even those who earnestly desire faith may be incapable of making. The requirement that one must be truly ethical before transcending ethics, and the consequent difficulty in doing so, may provide a check on suspension of universal ethical law. However, the intense privacy of faith for Kierkegaard means that it would be impossible for external observers to determine whether an individual had actually transcended ethics, or had merely reverted to a pre-ethical orientation in order to further her own selfish interests. It would be impossible for anyone of us to know whether someone was

sacrificing his son out of a singular obligation to God, or whether he was simply a murderer. Going beyond the universal also means risking the possibility of the demonic, another sort of paradox, but one in which a relationship with God is not established.[51] Singularity thus has its pitfalls, to be sure.

However, if we are to make room for individual difference which might be violated by enforcement of universal moral law, then singularity would seem to have a place. Without making allowance for singularity, there is the potential for drastically erroneous conclusions about individuals' actions that look immoral from a universal standpoint. If we allow that a subject may consist of more than just inclination and respect for the moral law, then Kant's ethics are insufficient. If an individual is capable of owing a duty to anything that is not universal, then according to Kant it is not a duty at all, but mere inclination. An example of this may be the French head-scarf affair. A religious duty to wear the hijab is not universalizable because it depends on the individual's specific religious faith and the attitude she takes towards that faith. However, a society that allows for only a universal conception of duty is likely to misinterpret this motivation, seeing it as mere inclination.

Because Kierkegaard considers reason to desire paradox and universalism to desire singularity, there is an opening between the stages of life rather than impermeable boundaries. The return to ethics after the development of faith signals a change in the conception of ethics, in which the universal is no longer absolute, but has been tempered with the introduction of singularity. While the singular individual who returns to the ethical realm appears externally to be similar to any ethical individual, the privacy of her

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[51] *Fear and Trembling*, 114-116.

inward state belies this apparent similarity. The absurdity of her return to ethics disrupts the rational coherence of universal ethics. While the knight of faith is invisible in the world, Kierkegaard assures us that he exists nonetheless.

The category of universal both does and does not change with the progression into the religious. It remains extremely important for Kierkegaard, but he recognizes that the universal is not everything. While Kierkegaard goes beyond ethics to faith, his conception of faith also involves obligation. The concept of duty changes with the onset of faith but it does not disappear. The duty of an individual in the context of society, with the consequent rights and obligations to other individuals in society, does not exhaust the concept of obligation. Levinas appears to believe that the ethical constitutes the entirety of human existence. Derrida instead attempts to bring Kierkegaardian religion into the realm of ethics, giving ethics an aporetic character because universalism must be held together with singularity at every moment. However, this then would seem to make Abraham's actions less remarkable, since this is only what all of us do at every moment.

Kierkegaard has been taken up by many philosophers in different ways and for different purposes, yet there remains something deeply troubling about his thought which resists assimilation, perhaps because he points towards the limits of philosophy itself. Kierkegaard holds universalism and singularity together in a contradictory relationship. He asserts that philosophy cannot contain singularity, but philosophy desires to express what is beyond its abilities to express. Kierkegaard is, finally, not solely focused on singularity because he retains universalism in ethics. Nonetheless, his conception of singularity disturbs our thinking about ethics. The journey into singularity and faith creates a paradox which cannot be resolved and which does not leave universalism

unchanged. The extent of this change is ambiguous, though, because only the singular individual can experience the absurdity of ethical existence. This absurdity is only possible with the suspension of reason, though it also involves the return to reason with the return to finite existence. This return is not a resolution of the paradox of faith and singularity, but rather its continuation within the ordinary world. Kierkegaard's introduction of a singularity in which the individual is higher than the universal and faith is higher than reason disturbs what Kant saw as the rationality of ethics, which he understood to rest on universality and require us to submit to the universal categorical imperative. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard recognized the importance of the universal and maintained it even while privileging its opposite, singularity. With a sort of negative dialectic, in which both opposite terms are maintained without combining them in a higher unity, Kierkegaard presents us with a powerful and deeply unsettling model for thinking about ethics.

Chapter 2

'Here I Am': For the Other

Through his use of the story of Abraham's intended sacrifice of his son, and the last-minute substitution of a sacrificial ram, Kierkegaard marks the boundary between universalism and singularity by sacrifice and substitution. Deriding what he sees as the violence of Kierkegaard's thought, Levinas refuses to subordinate ethics to religion. Levinas does not want to see singularity as involving a suspension of ethics, but rather as the very meaning of ethics: obligation to the other. Levinas identifies ethics with religion, rather than establishing a conflict between the two as Kierkegaard does. Levinas also seeks to connect the relation between self and other with broader social relations. Although Levinas distinguishes between singularity and universalism, he nevertheless connects the two, with universalism developing out of singularity, but with the ever-present threat that universalism will overwhelm singularity by falling into a totalitarianism in which individual difference is subsumed under the general. Universalism, for Levinas, is necessary in order to attend to the needs of the other; he understands it to follow from ethical responsibility. In order to make this linkage between singularity and universalism, Levinas must understand the self as absolutely responsible for everyone, to the point where I must substitute myself for others' responsibility. Levinas abhors human sacrifice, reacting vehemently against Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac, yet his understanding of ethical responsibility requires that I, and only I, am required to sacrifice myself for the other. Although sacrifice cannot be demanded of anyone else, I am responsible for everyone, for every other. Levinas sees this shared yet unique responsibility as meaning that we are all jews; that is, we are all under obligation that we have not chosen. There is a tension between this being a shared

responsibility, and one that belongs to me alone, because I must be responsible for everything, including the responsibilities of others.

Singularity

For Levinas, as for Kierkegaard, singularity consists in being oriented away from oneself, towards what is transcendent. Levinas sees singularity as the orientation of the self towards the other, who is absolutely transcendent while still being human. Singularity for both Levinas and Kierkegaard means obligation, but for Kierkegaard this is an obligation to God and for Levinas it is an obligation to the (human) other. While for Kierkegaard singularity involves a 'teleological suspension' of the ethical, Levinas believes this obligation to be inherently ethical.

Levinas understands the self not as primarily autonomous, free and rational, but rather in terms of the subject's response to the other. My freedom is restricted by my ethical relation to the other. I am subject to the other who commands my service: "In welcoming the Other I welcome the On High to which my freedom is subordinated."[52] It is as though the other holds me hostage. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas describes how the subject moves from egoistic self-enjoyment to disruption by its encounter with the other. The ability for enjoyment is necessary in order to be able to give to the other. Only through enjoyment of life can giving to the other have meaning. However, Levinas specifies that there is in fact no subject prior to its encounter with the other, because the ethical obligation arising from response to the other is constitutive of the subject itself. The subject moves from enjoyment to desire for the infinite, for the other, but the advent

[52] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 300.

of desire is not subsequent in time to egoistic enjoyment. This is because the other brings time to the subject.[53] The subject in isolation experiences only a succession of instants, while the subject in encounter with the other discovers the immemorial past, the past without origin, wherein the subject's responsibility to the other lies. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas is more explicit about how the subject cannot truly be thought about except in terms of its responsibility to the other.

Before all consciousness and all representation of the other, the self is obligated to the other.[54] The self is intrinsically open to the other, because it is by being for the other that the self comes to exist. The identity of the self is dependent upon the other and the obligation it owes to the other. The "other is in me and in the midst of my very identification."[55] Levinas describes this openness towards the other alternately as metaphysical desire, persecution, and obsession. To be an 'I' means, for Levinas, to be constituted by obligation to the other. Levinas regards singularity as the original condition of humankind: I am originally in a position of irrevocable responsibility to the Other.

The self cannot, for Levinas, be an entity complete in itself. Levinas describes the self as a restless unity. Although it is indivisible, it is always on the verge of breaking up because of its essential openness. Thus it is as though "the atomic unity of the subject were exposed outside by breathing, by divesting its ultimate substance even to the mucous membrane of the lungs, continually splitting up."[56] The self is always haunted by responsibility to the other. Although the self turns in upon itself in its enjoyment, it

[53] Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine*, 179.
[54] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 25.
[55] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 125.
[56] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 107.

nonetheless remains open to the reproach of the other. Levinas describes the individuation of the ego not as a closure but rather as "an openness that undoes my ontological identity and which, in the same movement, individuates me."[57]

Levinas understands subjectivity as developing out of ethical responsibility to the other. However, the subjectivity that develops subsequently is irreplaceable and unique. What develops is nothing but responsibility to the other, yet Levinas describes the enjoyment of the self as the "singularization of an ego in its coiling back upon itself."[58] Thus, the self in a way both is and is not independent of the other. Although the self is derivative of the other in the sense that it develops through its ethical responsibility, nevertheless the self develops an interiority, a capacity for enjoyment, which is not merely for-the-other. The two aspects of the self must be conjoined: without the capacity for enjoyment the self could not give to the other, and without being for the other the self cannot sacrifice its enjoyment for the other's sake. Without the freedom to ignore the other, and enjoy food instead of giving it away, responsibility to the other is meaningless. Thus, "morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent."[59]

Since responsibility to the other extends beyond the existence of the self, it can never have been chosen. Ethical obligation is not voluntary because it is what constitutes the self; Levinas names ethics the "calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other."[60] There is no assumption of this responsibility; it is mine without

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[57] Fabrio Ciaberelli, "Levinas's Ethical Discourse Between Individuation and Universality", in *Re-reading Levinas*, 90.
[58] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 73.
[59] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 84.
[60] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

my having chosen it. My responsibility to the Other cannot be passed on to another individual. I am uniquely obligated to the Other in a way no one else can be. Levinas describes my personal obligation to the other as an election; I am 'chosen' in my ethical responsibility. I am singular because my responsibility to the other is unique to me. No one can replace me in my ethical obligation. However, Levinas stresses that it is only in being-for-the-other that I am irreplaceable. Election is not egoistic; only because I am essentially determined by my responsibility to the other am I chosen. Election "is revealed to be a privilege and a subordination, because it does not place it among the other chosen ones, but rather in face of them, to serve them, and because no one can be substituted for the I to measure the extent of its responsibilities."[61] The idea of election brings out the involuntariness of responsibility and therefore also of singularity.

Religion and Ethics: Levinas' Critique of Kierkegaard

Whereas Kierkegaard distinguished sharply between religion and ethics, Levinas equates them. To be religious is to be ethical for Levinas, since for Levinas God is so radically transcendent that the only way in which divinity can be experienced is through the face of the other. Thus for Levinas duty to God can only be carried out through our responsibility to other human beings.

Religion is the name that Levinas gives to the relationship between self and Other in which the separation between self and Other is still maintained.[62] Thus it is a 'relationship without relationship': the self approaches the Other but without ever

[61] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 279.
[62] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.

comprehending the Other or facing the Other as an equal. Religion is considered by Levinas to be the ethical relation, directed towards the other without appropriating the other. The self is under an absolute responsibility to the other who is a human being, but in whom the trace of transcendence is present because the other eludes understanding and imposes responsibility. The other is both transcendent and pathetically vulnerable, occupying a position of absolute height in relation to the self, while also playing the role of supplicant.

Levinas' singularity is not the same as Kierkegaard's, because for Levinas singularity means precisely ethical obligation instead of the suspension of ethics Kierkegaard demonstrates with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Levinas sees religion as receptiveness towards the other that necessitates discourse. Religion for Levinas does not permit interiority because it requires orientation towards the other.[63] Levinas is a Jewish thinker, but he understands Jewishness as a general human condition. We are all jews, because we are all under obligation to the other.

Levinas criticizes Kierkegaard for his separation of ethics from religion, singularity from universality, resulting in an individualist reaction against totality. Levinas rejects what he sees as the excessive subjectivity, or egoism, which he sees in Kierkegaard.[64] He believes that Kierkegaard focuses too much on the individual, instead of how the individual is constituted in relation to the other. For Kierkegaard, it is the singular subject, in a private relationship with God privileged above relationship with other human beings, who resists the system or totality. Levinas instead opposes totality

[63] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201.
[64] Levinas, " Existence and Ethics", in *Kierkegaard, A Critical Reader.*

through the difference of the other. Levinas understands Kierkegaard to resist the system through a subjectivity that goes beyond ethics and is instead tensed upon itself, isolated from other human beings and unable to communicate with them. Levinas believes instead that it is the other who resists the system. Thus for Levinas, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son would be neither an indication of singularity, nor an ethical act. Abraham's silence is not indicative of singularity as it is for Kierkegaard. For Levinas, the highest point in the story of Abraham and Isaac is not Abraham's complete obedience to God's command, and the change which this enacts in his subjectivity, but rather that Abraham ultimately behaves morally, does not kill his son, and that the injunction 'thou shalt not kill' appears to Abraham in the face of his son, as well as in the command of God.[65]

In order to avoid a Kierkegaardian refusal of totality by the 'I', Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* has to recognize as an Ego the passage from Ego to other and therefore also has to recognize the egoity of subjective existence in general.[66] Derrida, in "Writing and Difference", contests Levinas' ability to eliminate the 'subjective existence in general' that Kierkegaard offers.[67] Derrida questions whether Levinas can in fact eliminate such a notion without renouncing philosophical discourse altogether. However, Ciaberelli argues that Levinas does accomplish this feat in *Otherwise than Being* through a change in his thinking about universality. Because in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas speaks only in the first person, Ciaberelli believes that the later text "succeeds in renouncing ipseity in general, because it gives up ontological language and shifts its focus from the ego to

[65] Levinas, "Existence and Ethics".
[66] Ciaberelli, "Levinas's Ethical Discourse", 89-90.
[67] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 110-111.

me."[68] Levinas attempts to solve the problem of treating ethical subjectivity *in general* through the radical asymmetry of refusing to speak of the ethical obligation of the other, but only of my own responsibility. My uniqueness, which disrupts totality, is that of the uniqueness of someone summoned to respond for the other. Only the ego separated from all universality can fully respond to the summons of the other and respond to the other's demand. Thus, the subject, by being established through an anarchic encounter with the other, is outside of totality.[69]

Derrida questions whether Kierkegaard would agree with Levinas' criticism.[70] Derrida argues that for Kierkegaard resistance to the system is not primarily egoistic because it is not based on 'Kierkegaard the philosopher' but rather on subjectivity in general, a distinction which Kierkegaard effects through the pseudonymous authorship of his works. It is this 'subjectivity in general' that Levinas contests but Derrida believes this contestation cannot be carried out while remaining within the confines of philosophical language. In order to think of the other in a way that does not reduce alterity to 'subjectivity in general', Derrida believes that Levinas must pose "the question of the relations between belonging and the opening, the question of closure."[71] Levinas addresses this question between opening and closure in the way he connects singularity and universalism. Levinas requires a means to link the self with others. Living in society with others demands a way of linking together absolutely disparate individuals. He does use the concept of the ego, although he limits it to mean only 'responsibility for the other'. In this limited form, the ego can be held to be a universal concept. Levinas writes

[68] Ciaberelli, "Levinas's Ethical Discourse", 90.
[69] Ciaberelli, "Levinas's Ethical Discourse", 91.
[70] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 110.
[71] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 110.

that, "there is true movement between the conceptuality of the ego and the patience of a refusal of concepts, between universality and individuation, between mortality and responsibility."[72] In limiting the concept of the ego to only mean responsibility for the other, Levinas intends to make it a non-general subjectivity which can still be usefully talked about and which, in its ambiguity can hold "the very diachrony of truth."[73] The ego as responsibility for the other is radically singular insofar as only the self can be said to be responsible. Yet, the self can substitute itself for the others, thereby taking up their responsibility. Thus, Levinas' ego, as exposited in *Otherwise than Being*, is universalizable while remaining absolutely singular. He believes that such a concept allows him to connect the self with others, while preventing all humans from being placed under the tyranny of a universal category of 'the human'.

Connecting Singularity and Universalism: The Third Party

Kierkegaard describes the development of the self as moving through the stages of the particular and the universal and finally, upon reaching the religious stage, developing into a singularity, but Levinas reverses this order. For Kierkegaard, singularity develops after the distinction between the particular and universal is established but involves a transcendence of both. Instead, for Levinas "the oneself is a singularity, prior to the distinction between the particular and the universal."[74] Levinas' conception of singularity has no origin. Rather, the self is always already in a position of obligation to the other and is determined by this obligation or obsession with the other.

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[72] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 126.
[73] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 126.
[74] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 108.

Rather than moving beyond universalism in order to develop singularity through a personal relationship with God, Levinas sees universalism as arising out of singularity.

Although I am infinitely responsible for the other, nevertheless I am also infinitely responsible to everyone. Levinas conceives of the other as the elusive, unique individual, but each human being is also an other. Thus, there is always someone else present at the encounter between self and other. I am infinitely obligated to the other, but there is also always someone else who commands my responsibility. The third party is also an other, although his presence cannot negate the absolute obligation that I owe to the other. Although the presence of the third party does not negate the infinite responsibility I have to the other, it does make it necessary to recognize the demand of other others, the necessity of addressing public obligations, and the necessity of justifying my actions in public. I am infinitely obligated to the other, and cannot be absolved of this responsibility. However, the third party is also an other, and as another other also imposes responsibility upon me. [75]

Ethics is thus not a purely private relationship for Levinas; it is always already the public and the political: "[the other] moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of a universality."[76] With the third party comes the public realm, the necessity for justice, law and politics. There must be recognition of competing demands that require the weighing and equating of my responsibility to all persons. Without the ability to make judgements and choices and to compare incomparably unique others, it would be impossible to take any action in the world.

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[75] Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 134.
[76] Levinas *Totality and Infinity*, 300.

For Levinas singularity and universality are inextricably linked. Universal law "itself refers to a face to face position which refuses every exterior 'viewing'."[77] The public universality and the private, asymmetrical singularity are, paradoxically, inseparable. Levinas thinks universalism is only possible through the asymmetry of the self's infinite obligation to the other. Thus, universality as the entry of the third party "is produced only through the face."[78] There is no face-to-face encounter prior to the presence of the third party, and the equality and universality that is required by the third party is impossible without the asymmetry of ethical relation.

Universality is contained in singularity, since the face-to-face encounter with the other also represents ethical obligation to everyone in society. Although it is only I who occupy this specific position of responsibility to the other, the presence of the third party means that I am also responsible before society as a whole. Thus, everything that takes place between the self and other "concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order."[79]

With the third party it begins to be possible to speak of the responsibility of the other and my own rights. The other presents himself as my equal because of the presence of the third party.[80] In the symmetrical realm the third party initiates I may now demand to be ethically treated as well. This myriad of demands requires adjudication in order to determine who owes what to whom. Thus despite the radical singularity that Levinas conceives, he also sees equation between radically unique individuals. Although there can be no external view of the ethical relation it is not therefore limited to a merely

[77] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 304.
[78] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 305.
[79] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 212.
[80] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

personal encounter between self and other. Rather, it is always already a public relation, requiring accountability and the balancing of responsibilities. Levinas writes that, "[everything] that takes place 'between us' concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order, even if I draw back from it to seek with the interlocutor the complicity of a private relation and a clandestinity."[81] My singularity in absolute responsibility to the other is also my universality, as I and everyone else must be treated as equals.[82]

Language

An example of this derivation of universalism from singularity is how Levinas understands language, which is necessitated by ethical obligation to the other, yet also inevitably betrays that obligation. The orientation of Levinas' self towards the other opens the possibility of discourse. The ethical relation between self and other requires the singularity of both individuals to be retained, with neither individual becoming fully known or comprehended. This relation between self and other allows for communication without their uniqueness being reduced to commonality. Language is prompted by the obligation I owe the other. Rather than representing an entry into an objective realm, Levinas believes language to involve giving to the other. It opens up the possibility of interaction between self and other. Levinas describes language as universalization, but

[81] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 212.
[82] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

stresses that it "is not the entry of a sensible thing into a no man's land of the ideal, is not purely negative like a sterile renunciation but is the offering of the world to the Other."[83]

However, although the possibility of language is necessary to ethics, all actual instantiations of language betrays the difference of the other. Levinas sees actual discourse as inevitably falling into ontology and totalization. Levinas explains this in *Otherwise than Being* through his distinction between the saying and the said. The relationship between saying and said is very complex, but simply put, Saying represents the original ethical response to the other and the said the actual putting into language of the ethical response. Thus, the said is indispensable to ethics, though it always fails to fully express the ethical force of the saying. In "language qua said everything is conveyed before us, be it at the price of a betrayal."[84] Both said and saying are necessary in order to reach out to the other in obedience to the ethical command.

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas describes universalism as coming about through the establishment of a common language, as I move towards the Other and offer my world to him. Universality develops out of metaphysical desire for the Other, which is not based on my need but arises out of my self-sufficiency and my recognition of the transcendence of the Other.[85] Levinas understands universalism as coming about by giving to the Other, by offering my world to the Other through language. Levinas writes that to

> recognize the Other is therefore to come to him across the world of possessed

[83] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 173-4.
[84] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 6.
[85] Desire for the Other, as Levinas conceives of it in *Totality and Infinity*, respects the alterity of the Other while still being drawn towards him. Levinas understands the same (the self) to be satisfied and autonomous in itself, but through desire for the other to move beyond mere satisfaction and be preoccupied instead with the other.

> things, but at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality. Language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other. To speak is to make the world common.[86]

However, in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas is more guarded with respect to the capacity of language. He explains that due to the non-coincidence of the saying and the said, the society established with the other is imperfect. Although the intention in addressing the other is ethical, as soon as that intention takes form in communication it totalizes the difference between self and other.

Whereas Kierkegaard's Abraham finds himself unable to speak as a result of obeying God's command to sacrifice his son, Levinas conceives of singularity as requiring speech in order to attend to the presence of the other. Abraham, in obeying God's command to kill his son, moves beyond language. He is no longer able to communicate with the rest of society, who are unable to understand the reasons for his actions. For Levinas, language always involves a failure and a loss of singular difference. Nonetheless, he believes language to be essential for singularity.

Substitution and Sacrifice

Substitution and sacrifice are for Levinas constitutive of singularity. As such, they may help to clarify how universalism can be contained within singularity. Whereas Kierkegaard delineates universalism and singularity through the violence of Abraham's intended sacrifice of his son at God's command, Levinas attempts to formulate a connection between universality and singularity that is non-violent. In *Totality and*

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[86] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 76.

Infinity Levinas uses the concept of fraternity to explain how the asymmetry of the self's infinite responsibility to the other can be extrapolated to give a social account of ethics. In *Otherwise than Being*, however, Levinas focuses on the concept of substitution, by which he means the assumption of the other's responsibility in addition to my own. Substitution means that I am always more responsible than anyone else. It ensures the asymmetry of ethics, even given the presence of a third party at the face-to-face encounter of self and other.

Whereas for Kierkegaard Abraham's absolute obedience to God superseded his obligations to his society, for Levinas these two obligations always coincide. According to Levinas, the 'here I am' by which Abraham answered the call of transcendence is also social because being answerable to the other is constitutive of selfhood. The 'I' is what is answerable for another, what stands ready to obey the call. For Levinas, the responsibility I owe to the other, and which constitutes me, is greater than anyone else's. I can ask of no one else what I am responsible for. The responsibility is mine alone and, as Kierkegaard describes Abraham's solitary journey to the top of Mount Moriah, it is a burden of which no one can absolve me.

Singularity constitutes an obligation to substitute myself for the other and assume the other's responsibility. This is necessary because of the nature of the self, which is essentially oriented away from itself and towards the other. I am responsible for everything, including the responsibility of others. To be a self "is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other."[87] Ethics is non-reciprocal for Levinas, since my responsibility is infinite, and thus always

[87] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117.

greater than the responsibility of the other. Although I am required to substitute myself for the other, no one is able to substitute herself for my ethical responsibility. No one can be responsible for *my* responsibility.[88] Because responsible for all, "I must substitute for all, substituting for everyone by virtue of a certain 'non-interchange-ability."[89] Paradoxically, my substitution for others does not mean that I am comparable to them. The others for whom I assume full responsibility are completely unique and singular. As well, there can be no substitute for my ethical responsibility. I who substitute myself for all cannot be substituted for. My absolute responsibility is what constitutes my uniqueness and singularity. In assuming all responsibility, I cannot be replaced. With his later emphasis on only speaking of the first person, me, without postulating any equivalence with others, Levinas conceives of the relation of self with other only through the self's substitution for the other. This relation is also, however, the meaning of the self. There is no personal interiority aside from being-for-the-other. Because of this, there can be no equivalence between my ethical responsibility and the responsibility of anyone else. "To utter 'I,' to affirm the irreducible singularity in which the apology is pursued, means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me."[90]

There is a paradox here, between the irreducible uniqueness of the 'I' whose obligation to the other requires substitution for even the responsibility of the other, and the fact that each I is under such an obligation and thus responsibility cannot be interchangeable. This demonstrates the ambiguous relationship between singularity and

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[88] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 126.
[89] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Works*, 150.
[90] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 245.

universalism, for Levinas. Individual responsibility impels one to substitute for all, yet because each person is also singular, also under ethical responsibility to all, there is a disjunction. The capacity for substitution is both the condition of ethics and the potential subversion of it, according to Levinas. He warns against the dangers inherent in understanding humanity in political terms, as consisting of "interchangeable men, of reciprocal relations. The substitution of men for one another, the primal disrespect, makes possible exploitation itself."[91]

Singularity is the condition of sacrifice. Only I can sacrifice myself because only I am constituted by being-for-the-other. The self is fundamentally open to the other, passive, and exposed to wounding and outrage.[92] Levinas emphasizes in *Otherwise than Being* that I can only sacrifice myself. I cannot call for the sacrifice of anyone else; I cannot demand that anyone else accept moral responsibility. For to "say that the other has to sacrifice himself to others would be to preach human sacrifice!"[93]

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, holds up Abraham's intention to sacrifice his son as a paradigmatic example of singularity. Abraham's obedience to God develops his own subjectivity into an openness to transcendent alterity which seems strikingly similar to that understood as singularity by Levinas, with the decisive difference that Kierkegaard understands this as religious only, and Levinas sees this as religious *and* ethical.

Levinas writes that "the passage of the identical to the other in substitution... makes possible sacrifice."[94] With both sacrifice and substitution we see the paradoxical equating of radically unique individuals. I who am a singularity stand in place of and

[91] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 298.
[92] Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 86.
[93] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 126.
[94] Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 90.

assume the responsibility of the unknowable other. This is only possible because the self for Levinas is inherently for-the-other, directed away from itself and open to the demand it receives from the other. The receptiveness of the self involves a 'passivity which is more than passive': the self is passive before ever choosing to be, which allows for this movement between singularities. Singularities are universalizable by virtue of the responsibility and requirement for self-sacrifice that constitutes them. However, Levinas does not wish to make victims of us all; he abhors the idea of human sacrifice. As a part of a universal human community, we cannot be expected to give everything to the other. However, I, as a singular individual constituted by obligation to the other, must do so. This singular responsibility cannot be generalized. Levinas will not command anyone to sacrifice herself for the other. And yet, he grounds universalism in just this demand. There is a disconnection between singularity and universalism, because universalism can never account for the full extent of the ethical obligation the other imposes on me, as a singular individual. Levinas aims at a linkage between singularity and universalism, through this radical responsibility of the individual. Because the self is constantly disturbed by the demand of the other, never self-sufficient, singularity is always directed towards universalism.

Joining ethics to the social: Fraternity

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas attempts to reconcile the demands for both universality and singularity through the concept of fraternity, which he believes to account for both the radical difference of individuals and the way in which we as humans find ourselves in a common society, under obligations to others we have not chosen. He

writes that it is "my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign that constitutes the original fact of fraternity."[95] Fraternity is not based on the similarity of human beings, but rather on their singularity and absolute uniqueness. Because fraternity links up disparate individuals who cannot be subsumed under a larger genus, the universality of fraternity has a complex relationship to singularity. Levinas calls it a "difficult universality: in the fraternity necessary for the 'logical extension' of a genre such as that of humankind."[96]

Humans are joined not by resemblance but by the obligation that they have not chosen, but which constitutes their individuality, thus "[fraternity] is radically opposed to the conception of a humanity united by resemblance."[97] The social community is founded on the common experience of the face-to-face encounter with the Other and responsibility, which Levinas also terms monotheism.[98] Levinas describes monotheism as "this human kinship, this idea of a race that refers back to the approach of the Other in the face, in a dimension of height in responsibility for oneself and for the Other."[99] This refers to their shared orientation towards the transcendent other, to whom they owe infinite obligation. The shared 'paternity' of human beings refers to the un-chosen character of their ethical responsibility, in which they find themselves without willing it, and which impinges on their free self-enjoyment. Just as being born to a father is un-chosen and constitutive of one's identity, Levinas believes the pre-original ethical obligation to the other to be analogous.

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[95] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 214.
[96] Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 113.
[97] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 214.
[98] Levinas *Totality and Infinity*, 214.
[99] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 214.

Humans are joined in society not by commonality but by an election to ethical responsibility. Because of this election, each person is absolutely unique and irreplaceable. Since Levinas believes equality to arise from the ethical obligation to the other, and fraternity rests on the shared, un-chosen obligation all humans are subject to, fraternity gives birth to equality and society. As the third party is an intrinsic part of the encounter with the other, and equality thus develops from radical asymmetry, so does fraternity give rise to human equality. The shared ethical relation to the other founds equality among humans.[100]

Perilous Universalism

Although Levinas believes universality to arise out of singularity, he nonetheless finds the concept problematic. Universality has the potential to reduce the uniqueness of the individual to a category, whereas Levinas insists that humans be thought of as individuals so unique that they do not even share a common genus. When "taken to be like a genus that unites like individuals the essence of society is lost sight of."[101] As well, there exists "a tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal, an order that is inhuman though distinct from the brutish. Against it man affirms himself as an irreducible singularity, exterior to the totality into which he enters, and aspiring to the religious order where the recognition of the individual concerns him in his singularity."[102] Submitting to

[100] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 214.
[101] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.
[102] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 242.

universalism does not express the individual. Objective thought, which Levinas sees in universal politics and Hegelian history, does violence to singularity.[103]

Although universality is needed in order to stave off violence and promote equality and public order, institutions nevertheless violate the singularity of individuals in treating them as universal human beings. Universality can become tyrannical in its abstraction from all that is unique and individual in persons. Singularity must then be posited against universalism. Against universality and impersonal, rational institutions "man affirms himself as an irreducible singularity, exterior to the totality into which he enters, and aspiring to the religious order where the recognition of the individual concerns him in his singularity."[104]

The other must not be thought of as a concept, for this is to inflict violence upon her. Comprehension or understanding appropriates the uniqueness of the other, thus subsuming her under knowledge. Subsuming the singular individual under generality obliterates what makes the individual unique. Thus, Levinas writes that an "existence called objective, such as is reflected in the thought of others, and by which I count in universality, in the State, in history, in the totality, does not express me, but precisely dissimulates me."[105] Universality is capable of a violence that obliterates uniqueness, making my obligation equivalent to that of everyone else: "A universal thought dispenses with communication. A reason cannot be other for a reason. How can a reason be an I or an other, since its very being consists in renouncing singularity?"[106] The death of the other can be lost through universality in history, since the verdict of history is taken as

[103] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 178.
[104] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 242.
[105] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 178.
[106] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 72.

truth, with the voice of the victim being silenced. Rational institutions, in being 'objective', presume to speak for all those they represent. However, Levinas warns that in this presumption these institutions can be tyrannical, that is, inhuman in their universality.[107] Systems or totalities such as rational institutions are violent because they are alienated from what is truly human: the individual.

Universality must be understood in the context of a larger society of human beings, who share commonalities. However, this serves to undermine the asymmetry of the ethical relation, in which the other is absolutely transcendent to the self, with the self being under an infinite obligation to the other. Thus, universality is problematic, and the substitution it relies upon is paradoxical for Levinas. The substitution fundamental to the non-reciprocal nature of ethics as Levinas conceives it must be understood without losing sight of the uniqueness and absolute difference of the self and other.

Despite the problems Levinas sees with universality, he nonetheless believes that it is necessary. Society must coexist with the radical separation of individuals. Although Levinas asserts that humans cannot be comprehended under the common rubric of humanity, that they do not belong together as species do with their genus, he nonetheless believes in the importance of human society. He writes that the face-to-face relationship with the other "both announces a society, and permits the maintaining of a separated I."[108]

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[107] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 242.
[108] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 68.

Between ethics and politics

Levinas distinguishes between ethics, as infinite obligation to the other, and politics, which requires the balancing of responsibilities and treating individuals as equals. This distinction between absolute and conditional responsibility can also be understood as the difference between ethics and morality, with morality/politics requiring a system of rules to guide our behaviour. Levinas understands such a system of rules to require universalism, but this falls short of the singular responsibility to the other required by ethics. Levinas thus critiques universalism by making it derivative upon singularity, while nonetheless still recognizing its importance. I shall explore Levinas' understanding of politics in order to elaborate how he relates singularity and universalism.[109]

Levinas understands the movement between ethics and politics, or between responsibility for the other and responsibility for all others, to take place through the other being simultaneously a single human being and all humans. We cannot distinguish ethically between our responsibility to our neighbour and to the stranger. The other *is* the third party, and the third party *is* an other. Levinas writes that we owe responsibility to the first person to come along, but that "'the first person to come along' for myself and the other person would also constitute the third party, who joins me or always accompanied us. The third party is also my other, also my neighbour."[110] There is both identity and difference between the other and the third party. While the infinite obligation

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[109] My interpretation of Levinas' view of the political is greatly indebted to Howard Caygill's *Levinas and the Political*, which makes a strong case for the importance of Levinas as a political thinker and not merely an ethical one. As well, Caygill argues for a highly nuanced reading of Levinas's political thinking, which is not merely reducible to liberalism, as Richard Cohen, among others, has argued. Instead, Caygill, along with Simon Critchley, argues that Levinas requires us to think politics in a way that challenges the status quo, rather than reinforcing it through ethical justification.

[110] Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 134.

I owe to the other can admit of no external view, nevertheless my obligation to her is public from the beginning. The asymmetry of ethics is always already the equality of politics because the third party is always present at the face-to-face encounter. This means that each person is both the singular other and a member of a human community whose universal human rights must be respected. However, Levinas diverges from the bulk of the Western philosophical tradition by asserting that these universal human rights are derivative upon the singular responsibility to the other.[111]

Levinas understands there to be movement between ethics and politics for he believes that the other can simultaneously be owed my infinite obligation while also being "a third party with respect to another."[112] Levinas wants to see obligation to the other as awakening us to politics. As a singular individual owing infinite obligation to the other, I am also an equal among equals, a human being in society with other human beings. However, it is not at all obvious how this asymmetry and reciprocity can co-exist simultaneously. Politics, in its requirement for equality and justice, can be seen as moderating the infinite responsibility I owe the other. There is always an excess ethical demand politics will fail to meet. The political subject and the 'I' who is for-the-other do not map onto each other. The requirement that I substitute myself for the other, that I assume the other's responsibility in addition to my own, is not universalizable.

Ethics requires recognition of singularity; the ethical relation is one in which the uniqueness of both parties is retained, without being assimilated to a totality or greater whole. Politics, because it deals in rules and systems, requires comprehension of

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[111] For an account of Levinas' understanding of human rights, see Roger Burggraeve's *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love.*

[112] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being,* 128.

individuals in order to determine their needs and provide for them; politics relies on universal concepts of humanity. Thus, there exists for Levinas an uneasy tension between ethics and politics because ethics always requires more from us than can be rationally and universally comprehended. This excess of the ethical is what inspires political action, but political action can never comprehend the full extent of ethical obligation. Still, the application is necessary in order to realize ethical responsibility, even though such application inevitably falls short of the ethical demand and even betrays it.

The danger of politics lies in its overwhelming of the uniqueness of individuals. Unable to respect individual difference, politics must attempt to understand individuals in universal terms. Such universal terms, however, are inevitably particularist because the radical uniqueness of individuals resists translation into something comprehensible to all. Through the horrifying example of National Socialist anti-semitism, Levinas describes the possibility that the ethical relation can be completely subsumed in totality. Through complete overwhelming of singularity, all individuals can become subordinated to a system that refuses to recognize the transcendence of the other human being. By anti-semitism Levinas means the hatred of the other human being, a hatred that denies both ethics and religion.

Without ethics, politics can reduce all forms of social interaction to the merely political or the merely universal, treating individuals solely as subjects under a totalitarian system. Politics "left to itself bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and

thus in absentia."[113] Politics on its own denies both a conception of the self that is inherently obligated towards the other and the transcendence of the other who cannot be fully comprehended. Although the I and the other have been responsible for the creation of the socio-political system, when this system overwhelms their singularity and treats them as solely universal subjects individuals are alienated from the very system they created. Politics is limited by its inability to fully acknowledge the singularity of individuals. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that the "State awakens the person to a freedom it immediately violates. The State which realizes its essence in works slips toward tyranny and thus attests *my absence* from those works."[114]

Although politics on its own suppresses difference and betrays ethical obligation, politics is nevertheless necessary to organize general responsibilities within society. As Simon Critchley describes, for Levinas the infinite ethical obligation to the other "entails, and has to entail, a relation to politics conceived—and conceived perhaps too traditionally, too narrowly, too abstractly—as the realm of legality, justice, the institution of the state, and everything that Levinas subsumes under the heading of le tiers, the third party."[115] Although Levinas understands politics in terms of legality and universalism, which seems divorced from the personal, ethical relation to the other, he nevertheless tries to understand them as connected, a task perhaps made more difficult by the strictness of his initial definition of politics.

Levinas attempts to build a bridge between an ethics that maintains separation between same and other, and a politics that involves society with all others. As the

[113] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 300.
[114] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 176.
[115] Simon Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas' View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them", 172-185.

embodiment of the demand for justice, Levinas' concept of politics is profoundly utopian, although it is not based on an ideal society that would involve the subordination of individuals within society. Rather, the politics he aims at is that of a 'beyond the state in the state', founded upon the singular responsibility for the other, but attempting to discharge that responsibility in the political arena. Levinas' politics seeks to attain super-political goals within the limits of the polis. Thus universalism is necessary but is not sufficient on its own. The goal Levinas has in mind is something beyond the capacity of politics, but which nevertheless requires politics.

The innovation Levinas develops in thinking the political is that the political is not enough: ethical obligation must always draw us beyond the horizon of the politics and universalism. Since the singular self cannot be justified,[116] it cannot be fully realized in the political realm. Politics demands that laws be respected and universality developed, but Levinas sees in the singularity of the self, defined as obligation to the other, the "sole possibility in being of going beyond the straight line of the law, that, of finding a place lying beyond the universal."[117] Ethics requires more than politics; it requires the recognition of an infinite ethical responsibility that transcends politics. Like Kant, Levinas recognizes limits on what politics can reasonably accomplish, yet still aims at the ethical that lies beyond the scope of politics. Although in many ways Levinas is indebted to Kant, Levinas goes far beyond Kant by thinking ethics as obligation to the other.[118] Whereas Kant's moral law is interior to the individual, while also being accessible by all persons through the use of reason, Levinas' ethical obligation comes from the exteriority

[116] Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 85.
[117] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 245.
[118] See Catherine Chalier's *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas* for a more detailed analysis of the similarities between Kant and Levinas.

of the other, the extent to which the other remains inaccessible to us. While both Kant and Levinas understand ethics to be an infinite project due to our human limitations, for Levinas there is no moderating of the infinitude of ethics through something akin to Kant's moral postulates. For Levinas, unlike Kant, obligation extends beyond what is universally required of every person. Because individuation occurs through the obligation imposed upon me by the other, the responsibility I have to the other is greater than anyone else's. Levinas understands ethical responsibility differently, as infinite obligation to the other, as religion.

Levinas perceives in the universal state the danger that politics will overwhelm religion, the ethical relation maintaining the difference between self and other. Religion, as the bond between same and other which does not form a totality, is opposed to politics, which

> tends toward reciprocal recognition, that is, toward equality; it ensures happiness and political law concludes and sanctions the struggle for recognition. Religion is Desire and not struggle for recognition. It is... glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the conditions of equality itself.[119]

It is important to note that in privileging religion over politics Levinas is not proposing theocracy. Rather, he wishes to subordinate politics to responsibility to the other human being. Subjecting individuals to religious rules would form the totality Levinas seeks to avoid because it would reduce singularity below a universal system. Levinas' religion consists in a 'humanism of the other man'; it consists in serving other human beings. Levinas describes religion as being served "above all by drawing near to one's fellow

[119] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 64.

man, and showing concern for 'the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the beggar', an approach that must not be made 'with empty hands'".[120]

Politics is required in order to fulfill responsibility to the other and the social equality that is derived from that responsibility. Since Levinas understands responsibility to the other as being both ethical and religious, politics for Levinas is required by religion, although it also inevitably betrays religion. In commenting on the Talmud, Levinas writes that "the essence of the State does not contradict the absolute order, but is called by it."[121] However, he also cautions that because the political realm is the actual, it is subject to corruption: "the State of Caesar, despite its participation in the pure essence of the State, is also the place of corruption *par excellence* and, perhaps, the ultimate refuge of idolatry."[122] Despite his occasional sympathy for the political exigencies undertaken by the actually existing Israel[123], there is also a sense in Levinas' writings that the Israel he supports is less a concrete entity than an ideal to be striven for. He asks, "[in] its very strength, is not Israel also the most fragile, the most vulnerable thing in the world?"[124] The real promise which Levinas sees expressed in Israel is that of "a State which will have to incarnate the prophetic moral code and the idea of its peace."[125] The politics Levinas supports exists perhaps only in spirit, not in real political instantiation. It is a politics that is utopian, that realizes the goal it aims at is beyond the scope of politics and thus must remain forever 'to come'. This demand that Levinas sees existing between

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[120] Levinas, "Judaism" in *The Levinas Reader*, 251.
[121] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 180.
[122] Levinas. *Beyond the Verse*, 183.
[123] See particularly a 1982 radio broadcast in which Levinas states that 'in alterity we can find an enemy'.
[124] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 193.
[125] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 194.

Realpolitik and idealism rejects both of these extremes in favour of support for the uniqueness of individual human beings.

However, the example of Israel highlights the problematic character of Levinas' understanding of the political. Levinas' support of Israel tends to treat it as an ideal, as the never to be fully realized goal of messianic politics. But Israel is nonetheless a very real state in the world today, accountable for injustice and violence. Simon Critchley describes how for Levinas, "the name 'Israel' is suspended, possibly fatally suspended, between ideality and reality, between holy history and political history."[126] The violence done in the name of Israel thus must alert us to the possible uses of Levinas' understanding of politics. Levinas' disconcerting statement that "in the face of the other we can find an enemy", and his defence in a radio interview of the murders of Palestinians refugees, may point to the dangers of what may be justified in the name of Levinas' messianic politics.[127]

Violence

Despite Levinas' attention to substitution and sacrifice as marking the hinge between singularity and universality, he nonetheless believes this to be non-violent. The simultaneous conjunction and opposition of singularity and universalism in Levinas' work means that I am both infinitely responsible to the Other, the first person I see, and required by justice to measure out my obligations to all others, to everyone in society. Thus, responsibility is both infinite and mediated. In the context of the story of Abraham,

[126] Critchley, "Five Problems", 175.
[127] In chapter three I will examine the danger of justifying violence in the name of Derrida's messianic justice.

Levinas questions, contra Kierkegaard, whether "[perhaps] Abraham's ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the ethical order [that] was the highest moment in this drama."[128] This is the moment, infinitesimally brief, in which singularity and universalism brush up against each other without coinciding. Abraham's singular responsibility to the transcendent other and his generalized responsibility to his son and to a larger society almost, but not quite, overlap. Abraham responds to God's command with an absolute humility, being willing to do anything which may be demanded. However, this complete receptivity to the call is moderated through a return to justice. It is at the very instant when Abraham is willing to transgress the ethical law in killing his son that his hand is stayed. If Levinas is correct in saying that it is the moment when Abraham hears the command to stay his hand that is the most ethical moment of the biblical story, ethics nonetheless seems to have an extreme proximity to violence.

In "Violence and Metaphysics" Derrida explains Levinas' ethical imperative as being Kantian in the sense that it requires respect for persons, but anti-Kantian in that this respect arises without passing "through the neutral element of the universal, and through respect – in the Kantian sense – for the law."[129] The relationship between persons for Levinas is anarchic, that is, without origin. Levinas' universalism does not involve the mediation of any principle: "Like a shunt every social relation leads back to the presentation of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face."[130] Rather, universalism is founded solely on the obligation to the other which is always already an ethical responsibility before any

[128] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 74.
[129] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 96.
[130] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

commitment being undertaken.[131] For Levinas, universalism and singularity are not merely opposed to each other in the manner of the particular/universal distinction. Yet Derrida notes that, "without the formal element of universality, without the pure order of the law, respect for the other, respect and the other no longer escape empirical and pathological immediacy."[132] By rooting universalism in an obligation to the other that is imposed upon me without my ever having consented to it, respect for all persons must be grounded in my absolute subjection. It is my infinite responsibility that is the ground for all respect for universal humanity. Thus, Derrida reminds us of the "terror of the other" which is the basis for Levinas' ethics. Whereas for Martin Buber, whose thought was an important influence on Levinas, the other is encountered as an equal, for Levinas our relationship with the other is dissymmetrical. [133] The other comes to us from 'On High', she commands our obedience because of her transcendence.

Violence can be found both in the self's denial of the other's singularity, and in the other's overwhelming of the self. Whenever either term of the self/other relationship is subsumed or incorporated, whenever the difference within the relationship is lost, violence takes place. If the other overtakes me, if I am carried away by the other, as Levinas believes to be the case in mysticism, for example, this is an example of violence. Discourse is non-violent, according to Levinas, because it allows for the difference of both interlocutors to be maintained. When I see the other's face and discourse becomes possible, this is nonviolent because it "maintains the plurality of the same and the other.

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[131] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 100-1.
[132] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 314.
[133] See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*.

It is peace."[134] However, the possibility of violence always persists throughout discourse. The face-to-face encounter with the other, because it contains the possibility of non-violent discourse, also always contains the possibility of violence.

Although Levinas believes that the face originally places upon me the interdiction against murder, he also admits that the face also presents us with the very possibility of murder. The interdiction against murder "even presupposes the possibility which precisely it forbids – but in fact the interdiction already dwells in this very possibility rather than presupposing it."[135] The infinite transcendence of the other both presents me with the impossibility of murder, and the temptation to do so.[136] Only the other is truly beyond my power, through her transcendent alterity, while still being a vulnerable living thing. Thus, the other presents me with both the possibility of an ethical relation *and* the possibility of transgression and violence.

Levinas argues that the other is not inherently violent. Although she overwhelms me and impinges on my freedom, making me a hostage in my responsibility to her, Levinas claims that the "'resistance' of the other does not do violence to me."[137] This is because Levinas believes that the face of the other opens up the possibility of peace, and violence only results from my betrayal of my responsibility. Although violence towards the other is perhaps inevitable, the other's imposition upon me is nevertheless primarily and originally peaceful. Thus, "[war] presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other; it does not represent the first event of the encounter."[138] The

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[134] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 203.
[135] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 232-3.
[136] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.
[137] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.
[138] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

violence involved in being a subject, in being persecuted by the other, Levinas claims is redeemed by the essential goodness of the ethical relation. He writes that in "this trauma the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of non-freedom."[139]

However, Derrida, in his early essay on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics", argues that violence and nonviolence are actually inseparable, that there is a violence which underlies the nonviolence of the ethical relation. Derrida states that "[there] is a transcendental and preethical violence, a (general) dissymmetry whose archia is the same, and which eventually permits the inverse dissymmetry, that is, the ethical nonviolence of which Levinas speaks."[140]

Derrida describes Levinas' ethics as "without law and without concept, which maintains its non-violent purity only before being determined as concepts and laws."[141] While it is true that Levinas distinguishes ethics from laws and thereby preserves ethics from violence, Derrida also questions whether ethics is not the foundation for all laws: "is this Ethics of Ethics beyond all laws? Is it not the Law of laws?"[142] Levinas wishes to separate the ethical relation, which is non-violent, from the inevitable betrayal involved in articulating it, which requires that unique individuals be treated as equal and comprehensible to reason. However, the movement that he attempts to formulate between ethics and the application of ethics, namely politics or law, requires a connection between the two. The correspondence between the other and the third party also requires this connection.

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[139] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 123.
[140] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", in *Writing and Difference*, 128-9.
[141] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 111.
[142] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 111.

Derrida notes that Kierkegaard recognized the contradiction between singularity and universalism. He explains that Kierkegaard "had a sense of the relationship to the irreducibility of the totally-other, not in the egoistic and esthetic here and now, but in the religious beyond of the concept... [and saw] in Ethics, as a moment of Category and Law, the forgetting, in anonymity, of the subjectivity of religion."[143] Levinas appears to connect singularity and universalism, while perhaps overlooking the extent to which violence may be an integral part of the ethical relation. The idea of religion Levinas works with may explain how he can so unproblematically connect ethical singularity and universal law or politics.

Jewish Universalism

Levinas sees identity between the ethical relation and religion. He also sees identity between religion and society: "the aspiration to a just society... is an eminently religious action."[144] Levinas sees Judaism as involving absolute duty to God that can only be carried out through obligation to other people. With Judaism infinite obligation corresponds completely with carrying out the law. Relationship between man and God, which for Kierkegaard represents the highest human development, is subordinated to the goal of a just society. This is perhaps the "state of mind that we normally call Jewish messianism."[145]

Levinas follows other Jewish philosophers in his understanding of the relationship between uniqueness and universalism. In considerations of Jewish chosenness and

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[143] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 111.
[144] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 21.
[145] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 21.

universalism, it has often been thought that uniqueness provided a direct path to the universal. Franz Rosenzweig for instance, understood Jewishness and humanity to be co-extensive.[146] However, Levinas does not understand universalism to require sameness. Rather, he understands it as arising out of difference rather than requiring the negation of difference. Whereas Kant, in his *Anthropology* and *Conflict of the Faculties*, described Jewish difference as an impediment to the goal of an enlightened, cosmopolitan society, Levinas understands being 'jewish' (in the sense of assuming ethical responsibility) as the means to a society that is both universal and rooted in the unique responsibility of the individual. In a sense, for Levinas, we are all jewish, since we are all unique individuals by virtue of an ethical responsibility which we have not chosen for ourselves. Human society is universal, but consists of singular individuals, and each is (paradoxically) more responsible than anyone else.

The Messianic

Through the messianic Levinas seems to mark a path along the boundary between singularity and universalism. The messianic is a way of negotiating between ethics and politics, wherein obligation to the other is also obligation to everyone in society. Levinas writes that "one belongs to the Messianic order when one has been able to admit others among one's own."[147] Through substitution and sacrifice for the other, by being a self who is a self only insofar as she exists for the other, Levinas charts a way of avoiding the totalizing potential of universalism and the purely political. Through the messianic there

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[146] See Robert Gibbs' *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* for a discussion of Rosenzweig's influence on Levinas.
[147] Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 98.

can be negotiation between singularity and universalism through the preservation of uniqueness within universality.[148]

For Levinas, time does not add up into a totality of history that would give to all individuals a fixed meaning. Rather, time is characterized by the messianic:"[the] waiting for the Messiah marks the very duration of time."[149] Time is always shot through with transcendence: my obligation to the other extends into the immemorial past, of which I have no memory, and on into a transcendent future beyond my own death. It is through time that the self is able to be for the other and therefore to be ethical: "[consciousness] is resistance to violence, because it leaves the time necessary to forestall it. Human freedom resides in the future, always still minimally future, of its non-freedom, in consciousness – the prevision of the violence imminent in the time that still remains."[150] As long as time continues the possibility of peace can come through time, from the beyond, and violence can be postponed. It is through time that the connection between singularity and universalism can be accomplished because time allows violence to be held in abeyance. Instead, Levinas asserts the ever-present possibility for each moment to surprise and overwhelm us. Due to the singularity of individuals, the possibility of justice, of a society of individuals in solidarity with each other by virtue of their irreducible difference, is possible at any moment and for all time.

The messianic in politics involves a transcendent demand that comprises both the possibility of peace and the potential for transgression. It constitutes the potential for both ethical responsibility and for murder. The transcendence in the face of the other, "the

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[148] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 87.
[149] Levinas, "Difficult Freedom" in *The Levinas Reader*, 252
[150] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 237.

anarchy of what has never been present, of an infinite which commands in the face of the other, and which, like an excluded middle, could not be aimed at."[151] Through transcendence, the political can be connected to the ethical. Levinas believes that he can maintain the irreducibility of the singular to the universality of politics by appealing "to a dimension and a perspective of transcendence as real as the dimension and perspective of the political and more true than it."[152]

The Messiah whose coming allows for this mediation of singularity and universalism is he who takes on the suffering of others: me. Because responsibility for others is exactly what defines me as an individual, "to be Myself is to be the Messiah."[153] Thus messianism does not mean waiting for a messiah who will redeem us and put an end to suffering and even to history itself. Rather, messianism "is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility."[154]

Although in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas speaks in the first person only of being elected, or chosen, to serve, he also claims that each individual "is virtually a chosen one, called to leave in his turn, or without awaiting his turn, the concept of the ego, its extension in the people, to respond with responsibility: *me*, that is, *here I am for the others.*"[155] While it is only I who am absolutely responsible, only I who am elected, this singular responsibility is yet universalized through the distance, the 'beyond time' of the

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[151] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 97.
[152] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 300-1.
[153] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 89.
[154] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 90.
[155] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 185.

messianic. Although my own ethical responsibility cannot be generalized, Levinas nonetheless states that, "God speaks to each man in particular."[156]

Because Levinas defines the self through its responsibility for others, insofar as anyone is a self they are responsible for the suffering of all. Thus, "[all] persons are the Messiah."[157] Obligation to others is universal insofar as each person is an 'I', insofar as they are a self. Levinas writes that messianism "is no more than this apogee in being, a centralizing, concentration or twisting back on itself of the Self. And in concrete terms this means that each person acts as though he were the Messiah."[158] Levinas unites individuals through a responsibility that, although it is imposed on everyone, is not shared. The self who is the messiah is entrusted with the ultimate responsibility; it is always upon *my* shoulders that the burden of the entire world is laid. Even though everyone is the messiah, to be the messiah is nevertheless a unique obligation that falls to me alone.

It is also through the messianic that Levinas seems to account for the foundational violence of the ethical relation. The self under obligation to the other is inherently good: "the self is goodness".[159] Rather than goodness being a choice, Levinas understands the self as being good under compulsion, because being good is what constitutes a self in the first place. The original persecution of the self by the other, prior to its constitution of a self and thus before all freedom, does not mean that the self exists in a state of original sin. Rather, this is "the original goodness of creation."[160] Levinas describes goodness as

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[156] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 184.
[157] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 89.
[158] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 90.
[159] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 118.
[160] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 121.

having chosen the subject before the subject is able to choose.[161] Through the original goodness of the messianic subject, who is determined in her responsibility to the other, Levinas sees a way of countering the violent traumatization of the subject by the other. The subject "is from the first a substitution by a hostage expiating for the violence of the persecution itself."[162] It is the subject who is called upon, before being able to choose, to sacrifice herself in order to redeem the violence of an an-archical, or un-original ethics.

Community

Levinas possesses a stripped down concept of the self that is defined primarily by its obligation to the other. To be a self means to be receptive to the demand of the other. This means that being an 'I' is defined through the response, 'here I am', which is elicited by the other. This concept of a self as defined by responsibility occasions a change in thinking about human society. This obligation is also generalized to everyone in society, however.

Levinas' objection to Kierkegaard seems to come down to the distinction he draws between ethics, equated with universalism, and religion, considered as singularity. For Levinas, universalism is dangerous in its propensity to subsume individual difference under a larger rubric. Without singularity, and the demand to recognize the absolute uniqueness of the other human being, universalism cannot serve its intended purpose: protecting freedom and equality. As well, Levinas does not believe singularity can be realized without the addition of universalism. Obligation to the other never means only

[161] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 122.
[162] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127.

obligation to a single individual because the third party is there from the very beginning. Ethics requires infinite obligation to the other, and as such, obligation to everyone in society. Although the other signifies the unique individual, as such the other also signifies humanity, which is not a faceless mass but consists of individuals who are united in their irreducible difference.

For Kierkegaard, religion is ultimately a private relationship between oneself and God; singularity is developed through obligation to God. Thus, singularity transcends human society. Duty to God requires a 'teleological suspension' of duty that is defined by human society. Ascending to singularity requires sacrificing what is most loved: for Abraham, this is his son. In *Works of Love*, Kierekgaard asserts that while it is necessary to love one's neighbour as oneself, it is necessary to love God above all.[163] While it is not necessary to place another human being above oneself, love for the divine must trump all other considerations. However, ethical duty requires seeing the needs of all other humans as equal in importance to one's own, since everyone is one's neighbour.[164] The merely ethical aspect of this is thus comparable to Kant's injunction to see humanity in oneself. What gives this duty its force of law, though, is obedience to God. Kierkegaard believes this duty to derive from "the boundary where human speech halts and courage forsakes one, there revelation breaks forth with divine creativeness and proclaims what is not difficult to understand in the sense of profundity or human parallels, but which still did not rise up in any human heart."[165]

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[163] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 36.
[164] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 38.
[165] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 41.

Kierkegaard and Levinas both base ethics on duty to God. For Levinas, duty is owed to an absolutely transcendent God. Thus, the law will never waver. Levinas even goes so far as to privilege duty to the law *over* duty to God (loving the Torah more than God). By asserting a 'telelogical suspension of the ethical', Kierkegaard relativizes social obligations; there is an ambiguity in their basis, because the duties we owe to our fellow human beings derive from a relationship with a personal God. For Levinas the connection between singularity and universalism is much firmer because God is absolutely transcendent, so duty to God *is* the same thing as following the law. Infinite obligation and social obligation are the same things. Thus Levinas is able to understand universalism as connected to singularity in a less problematic manner than Kierkegaard.

For Levinas, society and religion are united in a way that perhaps the Christian Kierkegaard would not conceive of. However, this overlooks the trust Levinas places in translation. In attempting to 'translate the Bible into Greek' Levinas assumes a possible equality between the two. Therefore, Levinas' link between ethics and politics, between singularity and universalism, should presumably not be limited by the particular God of Judaism. Levinas believes that the obligation to the other and the uniqueness this creates survives "the 'death of God'"[166] because he never presumes a connection with God. The transcendence Levinas theorizes is human; it is the secrecy of the individual, who can never be fully comprehended.

Although Levinas does not unproblematically connect singularity and universalism, he nonetheless sees movement between the two, through an understanding of the self as expiating for the fundamental violence of the connection. In conceiving of

[166] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 123.

the self as defined by an obligatory self-sacrifice, by a demand to substitute for the responsibilities of all, Levinas seems to replace Kierkegaard's intense scrutiny of Abraham with a focus on Isaac. Levinas rejects the sacrifice of others as abhorrent; it is rather self-sacrifice that he sees as necessary. It is the infinitely responsible self who allows for the connection between obligation to the other and the founding of justice. The self is ultimately held hostage by the other and Levinas says that the word 'I' means "*here I am*, answering for everything and everyone."[167]

[167] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114.

Chapter 3

A Peace to Come: Singularity and Community

With their interpretations of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida all understand sacrifice as playing a role in ethics and politics. In theorizing singularity, they recognize that violence is inevitably present, yet they all seek to understand community in such a way as to mediate violence. Given the violence of the sacrifice at the heart of the relationship between singularity and universalism, how can we understand peace? Derrida theorizes society using, among others, the concepts of cosmopolitanism and hospitality. However, Derrida's use of these concepts goes far beyond Kant's usage. Derrida includes an understanding of singularity within society, thus constantly destabilizing the very notion of society. Derrida conceives of a peace that is always to come, but which is also always linked to the present, to the here and now. A society rent by singularity and the radical responsibility which it demands can never be 'at peace' in the sense of attaining stasis or completion. Peace can only come to a society of singularities from 'beyond', through the messianic. Derrida thus connects singularity and ethical responsibility to the other, with a certain universalizable messianic structure. Through messianicity, which Derrida abstracts from all specific messianisms, Derrida sees a way of connecting singularities in a community that is continually opened up to the difference that constitutes it.

Community

Derrida thinks about community while always seeking to undermine it. He does not support either pure diversity or pure unity, but rather advocates a democracy which is supposed to allow for all differences, which he understands, according to John Caputo, as "highly heterogeneous, porous, self-differentiating quasi-identities, unstable identities, if

that is what they are, that are not identical with themselves, that do not close over and form a seamless web of the selfsame."[168] This community is founded upon a relation to the other, upon singularity, but since singularity is an infinite obligation to a never fully comprehended other, this foundation is always an ambiguous one, a groundless ground, so to speak.

The relationship between obligation to an elusive other, and the attempts which must be made to fulfill this obligation, is what I am considering here as Derrida's relationship between singularity and universalism. Of course, these terms themselves may be deconstructed. They do not exist in simple opposition to each other, but belong together and turn in on each other in a complex and ambiguous way. Says Derrida: "[this] attention to the singularity is not opposed to universality. I would not oppose... universality and singularity."[169] Calculations are necessary for determining actions; these calculations must be inspired by justice, by the call for justice (i.e. the response to the other), yet they can never in themselves be just. Derrida says in a roundtable discussion that a

> justice that could appear as such, that could be calculated, a calculation of what is just and what is not just... that is not justice... Justice and gift should go beyond calculation. This does not mean that we should not calculate. We have to calculate as rigorously as possible. But there is a point or limit beyond which calculation must fail, and we must recognize that.[170]

Justice is the relation to the other, for Derrida, and as such it is infinite and can never be fully expressed. Nevertheless it inspires expression in the form of action. The demand

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[168] John D. Caputo, "Commentary", *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida.*
[169] Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 22.
[170] Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 19.

which justice, the other, places upon us is that of action, of giving to the other and sacrificing for the sake of the other.

The Aporia of Responsibility

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida describes the aporia of responsibility as between responsibility to the singular other and universalized duty to all persons. Using the example of Abraham, caught in the paradox of obedience to God and duty and love for his son, Derrida states that this is the experience we all find ourselves in. We are all torn between our duties to all and our responsibility to a singular other. This is an unresolvable situation, for in order to give to the other we must betray our obligations to all the other others. For Derrida, Abrahamic responsibility realizes only through paradox the necessity for responsibility to both the singular other (e.g. God) and generalized obligation to all members of human society.[171]

The fear and trembling never ceases, since there can be no final judgement on whether one's actions have been adequate to the responsibility one owes. Our ability to attend to the unique needs of a single individual is disrupted by the requirement that we tend to the needs of all. The nature of responsibility is radically undecidable. Privileging any one individual over all the others is unjustifiable, since all are singular and irreplaceable. Paradoxically, however, universal duty *must* be disrupted in order to give to the singular other: since each individual is radically other, each imposes upon us infinite responsibility. It is this very aporia that requires us to act; out of the impossibility,

[171] My discussion of Derrida's 'turn to religion' and its significance for ethics and politics is greatly indebted to Hent de Vries' recent works *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* and *Religion and Violence*.

according to Derrida, comes the very possibility of action. All actions that attempt to respond ethically to the demand of the singular other must inevitably betray the other, as action requires minimizing the other's difference in order to understand her. According to Derrida, we are all Abrahams, since we can never respond to our obligation to a singular other without sacrificing the ethical responsibility we owe to all others. We can never respond to any other without sacrificing our ability to respond to all others, all of whom are equally owed our responsibility and service. Thus the choices we make about whom to give to and who to sacrifice remain unjustifiable.

It is important to note, however, that Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard is not strictly faithful to the story central to *Fear and Trembling*. As James K. A. Smith notes in "Derrida's Structural Religion", Derrida abstracts from the story of Abraham and Isaac, and makes it paradigmatic of the ethical aporia as Derrida conceives it: an obligated individual is infinitely responsible to a singular other, and the third to whom I am also responsible.[172] Derrida interprets the story through what he sees as an underlying structure that, although it remains religious because it involves faith and a relation to the transcendent, nonetheless is unconnected to any specific religion.

For Derrida, singular responsibility to the other and universal responsibility to all in society, based on their equal worthiness, remain contradictory and ethical responsibility requires that we hold these two competing demands together as paradoxical. It is impossible to balance singular and universal responsibility, but ethics requires that we continually attempt to do so. Thus, Abraham is "at the same time, the most moral and the

[172] James K. A. Smith, "Determined Violence: Derrida's Structural Religion", 201.

most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible."[173] In being responsible to God, he must be irresponsible to his son and to the moral community he lives in. But unwillingness to sacrifice his son would constitute irresponsibility to God. Abraham is involved in paradox, but it is important to recognize that he acts nonetheless, and that he acts in full awareness of his paradoxical and impossible situation.

Being ethically responsible requires us to make sacrifices because it is impossible to be responsible to both the singular other and all of the other individuals who are owed our service. Derrida writes that "tout autre est tout autre"[174], which he understands as meaning each other is every bit, or completely, other. This is to say that each individual is unique, and owed infinite responsibility. Each other is a transcendent alterity, which is why Derrida makes use of Kierkegaard's example of Abraham's responsibility to God. Obligation to God is analogous to our obligation to the unique individual, who is also transcendent, radically other, and beyond our comprehension. However, because this is the case for each individual, everyone is owed our responsibility and thus we must attempt to give to everyone. Our general responsibility to everyone is also a singular responsibility to each person, thus requiring from us infinite sacrifice. This means, though, that the very difference that makes each individual so unique is common to all, without that individual difference being eclipsed by generality.

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[173] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 72.
[174] Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*.

The Foundation of Universalism

A universal moral law limits the aporetic nature of responsibility. It articulates a response to singularity, but it can only do so by sacrificing the radical difference of the other, and by limiting the infinite responsibility the other imposes upon me. For Derrida, the foundation of a law or institution is outside the limits of what can be justified, because it is in respect to that law that judgements can be made at all. The law or institution itself cannot be justified.

The aporetic connection between singularity and universalism as Derrida conceives it, requires violence in order to mediate violence. In order to institute universal morality, there must be limiting of the infinite obligation owed to the other and the irreducible uniqueness of individuals must be violated. Derrida understands Kant as founding the moral law upon sacrifice. In order to uphold the universal moral law, responsibility to the singular other must be sacrificed. Sacrifice appears inevitable to Derrida, who asserts the

> [v]iolence of sacrifice in the name of non-violence. Absolute respect enjoins first and foremost sacrifice of self, of one's most precious interest. If Kant speaks of the 'holiness' of the moral law, it is while explicitly holding a discourse on 'sacrifice,' which is to say, on another instantiation of religion 'within the limits of reason *alone*': the Christian religion as the only 'moral' religion. Self-sacrifice thus sacrifices the most proper in the service of the most proper. As though *pure* reason, in a process of auto-immune indemnification, could only oppose religion as such to a religion or *pure* faith to this or that belief.[175]

God's arrest of Abraham's knife-wielding hand may be understood as the moral law limiting the extent of my sacrifice and so as the institution of 'humanity' as ends in themselves. However, the equation of a divine command with the universal, rationally

[175] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge", 88.

intelligible moral law negates the singular nature of God's intervention. Equating religion and ethics thusly obscures how the foundation of law is itself an unjustifiable and ultimately undecidable act.

The religion Derrida supports is divorced from any specific religious doctrine. Like Levinas, Derrida understands religion as obligation to the other. This is a structural religion, which describes how the relation to the other is a relation to what is transcendent and can never be fully known. Derrida describes religion as "will and freedom *without autonomy*. Whether it is a question of sacredness, sacrificiality or of faith, the other makes the law, the law is other: to give ourselves back, and up, to the other. To every other and to the utterly other."[176] Religion for Derrida is this attitude of being obligated to the other, always already in a position of responsibility to the other. This attitude nonetheless requires active response on the part of the individual. One must be continually attentive and giving to the other. This is both a responsibility and a description of the position we all find ourselves in; it is not limited to the specific religious affiliations individuals may subscribe to.

According to Hent De Vries' interpretation, universalism has its source in radical alterity or transcendence. He writes that,

> [s]ome divine action has (or had) at some point to be assumed, postulated, posited, affirmed as a *positum* of sorts, for morality – reason, pure religion – to come into its own, that is to say, to become public, universal, all in all, as its very concept demands. That is the paradox (or is it an aporia?) upon which Kant's thought is based. The tension that it reveals can only be mitigated, negotiated, by a pragmatic engagement – indeed, a politics – of sorts.[177]

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[176] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge", 71
[177] Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence*, 233.

Derrida explores Kant's work in search of this underlying paradox, of the necessary relation in contradiction of singularity and universalism. As well, Derrida attempts the sort of pragmatic engagement that De Vries sees as the necessary way of dealing with, without doing away with, this conflicted relationship.

Derrida does not reject universalism outright; he takes concepts from Kant that rely upon it. Giving a double reading of Kant which is both loyal to Kant's intentions while also bringing out more than Kant himself wrote, Derrida claims not to oppose the goals of the Enlightenment. Neither a proponent nor opponent of religion, Derrida asserts a preference for

> what, in politics, is called republican democracy as a universalizable model, binding philosophy to the public 'cause', to the *res publica*, to 'public-ness,' once again to the light of day, once again to the 'lights' of the Enlightenment, once again to the enlightened virtue of public space, emancipating it from all external power, for example from religious dogmatism, orthodoxy or authority."[178]

Perpetual Peace: Politics and an End to War

Kant's political philosophy does not delve into the aporia Derrida sees between singularity and universalism. Nevertheless, Derrida deconstructs Kant's writings on cosmopolitanism and hospitality in order to theorize society in a way that does include singularity and that allows singularity to destabilize and open up universality.

Kant distinguishes between ethics and politics, but both are based upon universal laws. In ethics, actions should be dictated by their maxim being capable of universal application, and political arrangements should be organized along universally applicable laws. Justice requires that laws admit of no exceptions: thus, both ethics and politics must

[178] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 47.

treat people as ends in themselves and must treat them equally. The freedom of every person is to be protected, and can be limited only insofar as it is necessary to protect everyone's freedom. The rule of law that protects everyone's freedom is threatened by war and all political violence. Therefore, Kant sets forth the establishment of peace as the ultimate (albeit unlikely to ever be completely fulfilled) goal of politics.[179] However, Derrida contests Kant's distinction between violence and peace. Derrida asserts that

> *All* Nation-States are born and found themselves in violence...the moment of foundation, the instituting moment, is anterior to the law or legitimacy which it founds. It is thus *outside the law*, and violent by that very fact."[180]

Derrida suggests that because Kant's ideal of peace is instituted through juridico-political means, such a peace retains within it "a trace of the violent nature with which it is supposed to break, the nature it is supposed to interrupt, interdict, or repress.[181] If this is the case, then the means towards Kant's peace, international law, is itself founded in violence. For Derrida, Kant's ideal of peace cannot be fully separated from the violence of its inception.

Kant believes that cosmopolitan peace will develop through the teleology of nature. Through self-serving intentions, a federation of nation-states will emerge which will curb international war. The reason internal to human beings will cause them to seek their own benefit, which can be found in the cessation of war and the guarding of their freedoms through universal law. However, this progress is never complete. The state of perpetual peace never fully arrives and there is always the need for further progress. Because a political state can never guarantee that its citizens behave morally, a state of

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[179] Kant, *On Perpetual Peace.*
[180] Derrida, "On Forgiveness", 57.
[181] Derrida, *Adieu*, 89.

perpetual peace can never be fully realized. Kant believes that progress towards rationality, and consequently peace, happens in history. Although rationality is insufficiently developed in an individual life, within the life of the species as a whole progress is able to take place.

While Kant bases political progress in the natural instinct for self-preservation, he nevertheless holds the ethical requirement to be far more rigorous. Being ethical requires acting from duty, and depends on the internal disposition of the individual. In politics, Kant thinks that infinite progress towards peace is the most that can be achieved. Because being truly ethical constitutes such a challenge, he is skeptical that a society of truly ethical people could ever come to be in this world. However, he still believes that the higher demand to be ethical must still be pursued, even though such a demand is unlikely to be met in human society.

Derrida explores Kant's understandings of cosmopolitanism and hospitality in order to expand these concepts, by understanding singularity as their ground. As a result, Derrida understands politics as aiming at an inclusion that goes beyond universalism. Politics must aim beyond what is possible within the bounds of politics alone; it must aim to include the recognition of absolute responsibility to the singular other. However, such recognition is beyond the scope of politics, which is only capable of, at best, treating individuals as equals. Thus, a more radical understanding of cosmopolitanism and hospitality, which is not merely limited to a universal conception of the human, is required, although universalism is still retained as an essential means to realizing ethical responsibility.

Cosmopolitanism and Hospitality

Kant's cosmopolitan law goes beyond the dictates of individual states, and grants rights to all persons universally. Universal hospitality is guaranteed to all people as a result of their shared status as autonomous, rational beings. However, this hospitality is still granted by the republican state. Membership in a given nation is still required. Nation states are required to allow foreigners to visit and travel safely through the territory, but beyond this minimum requirement hospitality is left to the discretion of the state.

Derrida believes it is necessary to go beyond the universal hospitality envisioned by Kant and extend that hospitality even further, to a welcome which is blind to the particular circumstances of the other, which welcomes the other despite, or rather because of, the other's radical difference. Instead of hospitality being owed to the alien either because of his citizenship in a given nation, or his status as a human being and thus a part of a universal brotherhood, Derrida thinks of hospitality as being owed because of his very status as an outsider.

This is a welcome in which the host gives up his privileged position, because the other demands his service. The nation-state no longer holds the prerogative in determining the measure of hospitality that will be extended to the guest. Hospitality becomes much greater in its scope. In French the word for host and guest are the same: *hôte*. Derrida exploits this double meaning to demonstrate the ambiguity of his conception of hospitality. The one who welcomes is displaced in his role as host by the one who approaches, who actually commands the hospitality received. Derrida writes that the host "receives the hospitality that he offers *in* his own home; he receives it *from* his

own home – which in the end, does not belong to him. The *hôte* as host is a guest."[182] Absolute hospitality reverses positions of host and guest; it involves the annihilation of the capacity for hospitality itself. Derrida claims that hospitality effaces itself since it involves an opening to the infinity of the other.[183] Because the self is overwhelmed by the approach of the other, the very ability to welcome the other is put into question. The privileged position of the self is challenged by the arrival of the other. Thus, hospitality is perhaps never mine to give, but must come from the other. Although Derrida admits that Levinas would perhaps not put it this way, he nonetheless says that hospitality enters us into an aporia because we are obliged to extend hospitality to the other, but the other's arrival disrupts our capacity for hospitality. Despite the impossibility of our position, without it "there would be no promise of a path [and] it is necessary to *begin by responding*."[184]

Derrida sees two aspects in Kant's thinking about hospitality.[185] Cosmopolitan law is understood as unlimited universal hospitality, according to which all humans, by virtue of natural law, have equal common possession of the earth. This precludes any private ownership of property that would involve excluding others from the premises. Additionally, however, the institutions of state, political boundaries, etc. belie this natural co-extensiveness of humanity. Political entities do exclude others who do not share the same affiliation. Kant thus bases hospitality on law and makes it subject to the political and juridical will of the state. Thus, the natural openness owed to all humans is limited by politics and institutional law.

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[182] Derrida, *Adieu*, 41.
[183] Derrida, *Adieu*, 23.
[184] Derrida, *Adieu*, 24.
[185] Derroida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 20.

Derrida sees in Kant's account an important relationship between the law of unconditional hospitality, which is unlimited and open to all, without consideration of their identity, and conditional laws of hospitality that are instituted and enforced by the state. Although the law of unconditional hospitality is essential, it is meaningless without the actual instantiations of this law in the machinery of states. The law of hospitality as such depends on practical ways of carrying out this law, which nonetheless will restrict its unconditionality. Cosmopolitanism requires both an openness to the other, without any knowledge of the other or relationship with the other, but also, practically, requires practices of greeting the other, of making the other at home. This will always rely on rules and protocol, despite the fact that they will always fall short of the unconditional demand for hospitality.

In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida explores the relationship between "an *ethics* of hospitality (an ethics *as* hospitality) and a *law* or a *politics* of hospitality."[186] Derrida equates the law or politics of hospitality with a Kantian conception of universal hospitality by virtue of cosmopolitical law. The ethics of hospitality would consist of singular responsibility to the other as refugee or outsider, requiring that the host give everything to the other, even to the extent that the host must himself become homeless. Derrida does not find a foundational relationship between such an ethics and politics in Levinas' work, but believes this lack does not indicate a fault in Levinas' thinking.[187] Rather, Derrida supports this gap between ethics and politics because it allows us to think

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[186] Derrida *Adieu*, 19.

[187] See Robert Bernasconi's "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida" in *Derrida and Difference* for a discussion of Derrida's reading of Levinas. Bernasconi asserts that Derrida's reading is not a critique, but rather a deconstruction of Levinas' writings, that Derrida is not arguing against Levinas, but instead taking up the distinction between Levinas' intententions and his philosophical discourse.

law and politics in a new way; it would open "both the mouth and the possibility of another speech, of a decision and a responsibility, where decisions must be made and responsibility... *taken*, without the assurance of an ontological foundation."[188]

Thus, although the law or politics under discussion follows in the tradition of Kantian cosmopolitanism, it is not grounded in an ethics of respect for people as ends in themselves, as it is for Kant, but is rather derived from singular responsibility to the other. This singular responsibility is infinite and elusive; thus it cannot provide a solid foundation for politics, but must instead continually disrupt politics. Derrida's renewed cosmopolitical thought does not have its foundation in a universal conception of what it means to be a human being. Although it is altered by the openness and infinite responsibility to the other of ethics, such a politics is not unrelated to universality.

The Messianic Without Messianism

Although Derrida follows Levinas very closely, the concordance of their thought is incomplete. They meet, as Levinas states and Derrida echoes, at "the heart of the chiasm". Derrida attempts to thoroughly examine and criticize religion in order to go beyond it.[189] Whereas Derrida ultimately remains agnostic, Levinas seems more enthusiastic about religion, asserting that being Jewish is identical with being ethical, though Levinas does understand Jewishness in a general way, as responsibility to the other. Levinas thinks it is possible to identify religion with ethics because he defines both as being in a disinterested 'relation without relation' to the other. However, Derrida's

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[188] Derrida, *Adieu*, 21.
[189] See Derrida's writings collected in *Acts of Religion*.

ideal of religion is devoid of all actual content. His is a structural religion, whereas Levinas identifies his concept of religion as specifically Jewish, even though he equates Jewishness with people of the law, and more generally monotheistic. Although Levinas does not believe that his conception of religion, as equivalent to ethics, has any necessary content beyond the disinterested relation to the other as a singular, irreducible individual, nevertheless Levinas does describe it in particularistic terms.

Derrida attempts to understand the messianic as a universal structure by emptying it of dogma and content. Derrida's religion is a purely formal one. By understanding religion in such a way, he attempts to use religion in a way that can be useful for all, without imposing a dogmatism that would violate the singular difference of individuals. Religion for Derrida is a relation to alterity that calls us to do justice to that difference. Like Levinas, Derrida understands religion as responsibility to the other, but Derrida carefully attempts to distance himself from all specific messianisms, including Zionism (which Levinas endorses in certain ways).

Derrida distinguishes between specific messianisms, which further conflict and war, and a structural, transcendent religion which is the condition for all action and which imposes the demand for justice. Whereas concrete messianisms claim universal application of their particular version of the truth and the law, and thereby result in war, abstract messianicity involves the general structure of opening to alterity and the consequent demand for justice.

The messianic is distinguished from all specific messianisms in that it refers to waiting as a structural part of existence without concrete ideas about what is to come. The messianic involves an openness to a future which eludes all of our representations of

what might come about in the future. The messianic does not refer to a future that will eventually come to pass, but rather to an unknowable futurity which is also involved in the present, 'here and now'. The 'to come' of the messianic is absolutely undetermined and deferred, but the responsibilities which the messianic impose are effective at this very moment, impinging upon us with extreme urgency.

In "Faith and Knowledge" Derrida links messianicity with the abstract desire for justice, which he calls the hope for a "universalizable culture of singularities"[190]. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida claims to adhere to a certain spirit of Marxism: the self-critical attitude, which Derrida sees as a part of the Enlightenment project worth preserving, but most importantly, "a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation, a certain experience of the promise."[191] This messianicity is distinct from any messianisms or dogmatisms. This promise, Derrida asserts, is a promise that must be kept, which demands new ways of action.

The messianic therefore involves an act of faith that cannot be categorized under either reason or mysticism. Derrida calls it the undecidable or unjustifiable grounding for all law and institutions. It involves an opening to the other, who because never completely knowable, is always able to surprise us. It involves a relation to singularity beyond universal and rational categories, although it also permits the founding of these categories. This messianicity would not be linked to any given religious revelation and would not have any particular historical incarnation, without being completely outside of

[190] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledege", 56.
[191] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 89.

history.[192] In the experience of the stranger, the messianic truth exceeds any specific place and time, as well as the identity of the self.[193] The "hospitality offered would thus itself signify a belonging to the messianic order."[194]

However, Derrida vacillates between completely distinguishing the messianic from all specific, historical messianisms, and understanding messianisms as singular events in themselves, which are the sites through which the messianic can be experienced. As James K. A. Smith points out, to understand the messianic as a framework completely devoid of content would make it a transcendental universal of the most classical kind, abstracted from spatio-temporality and thus capable of justifying the very violence which deconstruction attempts to overcome.[195] In a roundtable discussion, Derrida describes the openness to the other as a faith that is not religious.[196] This openness requires a faith which does not have any specific tenets but rather involves an attitude of receptiveness to what is completely different from the self, and thus potentially a threat as well as a gift. This attitude of openness cannot be completely determined by any one religion, says Derrida. But it is a faith that is "completely universal."[197] Smith is correct in cautioning of the violent potential of such an over-arching universal structure. However, this universality is never entirely separated from the singular instances in which this structure is manifested. Derrida both recognizes the singularity of religious events, such as in the story of Abraham and Isaac, while also trying to abstract from their

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[192] Derrida, *Adieu*, 67.
[193] Derrida, *Adieu*, 69.
[194] Derrida, *Adieu*, 72.
[195] James K. A. Smith, "Derrida' s Structural Religion", 210.
[196] Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida.*
[197] Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 22.

concrete violence. The messianic is described as both a structural 'arrival of the other', but also manifesting itself in the actual events.

As well, Derrida's attentiveness to the violent potential of such a universal structure prevents him from attempting to justify political action on the basis of this messianic structure. Derrida's conception of justice is always 'to come'; it is the condition of possibility for action, although actions inevitably betray justice because for Derrida justice remains the condition of possibility for all future actions. Specific actions are not just in and of themselves; in acting there is the determination of the rule for acting. Political decisions are taken without having a foundation; in the doing, they participate both in the possibility of justice and the possibility of violence.[198] Derrida also seems to accept the violence that could result from this structural messianicity: "[abandoned] to itself, the incalculable and giving idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse conclusion."[199] Thus, the most abstract messianicity could provide justification for the worst violence, committed in the name of justice.

Additionally, Regina M. Schwartz notes the difference between universal law and universal justice.[200] What Derrida holds as a universal structure of the messianic, or justice, is not a universal procedure. It is not universally applied, but must be actively interpreted to apply in each specific context. However, Smith's concerns about the potential uses Derrida's structural messianic could be put to are important ones. For Derrida, the danger of a universal structure of messianicity being used to justify injustice

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[198] Derrida, "Force of Law", 256.
[199] Derrida, "Force of Law", 257.
[200] Regina M. Schwartz, "The Revelation of Justice", in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, 337-346.

is an ever-present one. However, it is also an unavoidable danger. The very project of pursuing justice must always involve the possibility of injustice, thereby requiring constant vigilance to the ways in which actions betray their inspiration.

While Derrida wishes to distance himself from specific messianisms, this is not entirely possible. He understands the messianic to necessitate action; justice is inseparable from actual political decisions.[201] Derrida opposes messianisms on the basis that they subordinate singular difference to a broader social or religious goal. However, he also recognizes that to some extent all attempts at calculating responsibility, at determining universal law, will do so. Derrida does not seek to eliminate violence; he believes this to be impossible. Rather, he seeks to mediate violence, and the way he attempts to do this is by relating the structural messianic to actual decisions and actions that are demanded by the messianic, although never justified by it. As Hent de Vries describes, responsibility, hospitality, peace, etc. are 'quasi-transcendentals' which are not themselves given and stable structures, but rather exist only through our acts.[202] The messianic can never be the grounds for determining what to do, but it nonetheless always provides an impetus for action. Singularity, the relation to the other, thus contains the possibility for both peace and violence, since the action it inspires is always ultimately unjustifiable.

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[201] See Ernesto Laclau's article "The Time is Out of Joint" in *Diacritics* 25.2, 86-96, for a critique of Derrida's basing normative ethical claims on the 'groundless ground' of singularity.
[202] Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, 311.

Cosmopolitanism and Jewish Universalism

By coining the term 'hostipitality', Derrida seeks to convey the combined possibility of both violence and peace provided by the other. The other demands our hospitality, but also our hostility, since the vulnerability of the other allows for the possibility of violence. The encounter with the other opens up both possibilities, permitting both peace and conflict. Derrida seems to point out that Levinas may minimize the danger and violence of religion. He describes Levinas as naming religion the "being together as separation [which] precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community."[203] However, placing this conception of community under the name 'religion' is problematic since the universal category of religion threatens to elide the exclusions which religion can enact. Derrida believes that Levinas prefers "universality to cosmopolitanism."[204] A 'religious' universalism, even one modeled after the outsider status of Judaism, would presuppose a shared attitude of belief and thus would recreate the boundary line of believer/nonbeliever, member/nonmember.

The universalism Levinas proposes, based on monotheism, appears far more problematic to Derrida. Martin Srajek describes how for Levinas

> a 'we' could be given only through the communal worshipping of the one God of monotheism. This is a 'we' granted by God rather than being a label that the community has found for itself. This 'we,' in other words, is a silent acknowledgement of our nonreciprocal relationship with God. As soon as the 'we' becomes part of the actual social relationship, Levinas sees it become the principle of egotism and solipsism.[205]

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[203] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 95.
[204] Derrida, *Adieu*, 88.
[205] Martin C. Srajek, *In the Margins of Deconstruction: Jewish Conceptions of Ethics in Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida*, 137.

Levinas roots the social relationship in obligation to the other, and he terms religion the relationship with the other that maintains the separation between self and other. Levinas seems to want to make ethical responsibility correspond with duty to God, albeit a God which is so absolutely transcendent that our only relationship with him is through our responsibility to the other human being.

Derrida, however, does not to want to root the 'universalizable society of singularities' in belief in God. While Derrida is comfortable comparing the singular other to God, in that Abraham's responsibility to God is analogous to the responsibility we owe to the singular other, the monotheism which Levinas sees as linking people in fraternity is approached carefully and critically by Derrida. While Derrida recognizes the monotheistic roots of notions like hospitality and cosmopolitanism, he interrogates these roots in order to go beyond them. Derrida notes in "On Forgiveness" how the Abrahamic language of forgiveness has become a universal idiom and is the agent and symptom of internationalization.[206]

Derrida uses the neologism 'globalatinization' (mondialisation in French) to describe the concurrent phenomena of the spread of monotheism, principally Judaeo-Christian, and increasing international connections. This Abrahamic tradition is at once singular, because it is a specific religious traditions among others, but is also "on the way to universalisation"[207] While Derrida finds important concepts within this tradition, he is also wary of their particular history which does not necessarily translate on a global scale.

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[206] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 28.
[207] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 28.

Unlike Levinas, Derrida does accept the term cosmopolitanism, despite its Kantian connotations, but he attempts to expand its meaning. Derrida raises doubt concerning Levinas' declaration of a Jewish universalism. Derrida questions Levinas' avowal of a Zionism which is not merely another nationalism, noting that "we know better than ever that all nationalisms like to think of themselves as universal in an exemplary fashion, that each claims this exemplarity and likes to think of itself as more than just one more nationalism."[208] There is a potential problem in any particularist aspirations toward universalism.

Derrida describes Levinas as opposed to Kant's understanding of peace. Derrida writes that, although according to Kant universal hospitality eventually puts an end to all war by instituting peace, for Levinas war already implies a relationship to the other, and therefore the possibility of peace. As well, while for Kant peace results from juridico-political institutions, for Levinas peace goes beyond the merely political.[209] Derrida seems to find Levinas' conception of peace troubling, in that Levinas veers dangerously close to claiming that war is a continuation of peace through other means, because war, like peace, involves an encounter with alterity. However, Derrida himself recognizes the necessary proximity of war and peace. In his *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida describes how there can be no friendship without the possibility of killing and this possibility establishes a political community contingent upon the potential mortality of all parties.[210] Derrida questions whether there might be a way of conceiving of the political that does not rely on demarcating friend from enemy. This would require opening up to the

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[208] Derrida, *Adieu*, 117.
[209] Derrida, *Adieu*, 49.
[210] See Edith Wyschogrod's "Autochtony and Welcome" in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, 59.

stranger, without knowing whether he is friend or enemy, since such radical openness would be prior to any knowledge of what the stranger will do.

Derrida describes Levinas' movement between ethics and politics as both necessary and contradictory. While equating people is necessary in order to dispense justice, it also overwhelms their absolute uniqueness. The infinitude of responsibility owed to the other can never be fully expressed in the moderation of duties in politics. Politics, with the third party, represents the moderation of responsibility. However, Derrida posits that "the third would thus protect against the vertigo of ethical violence itself... [and] the protecting or mediating third, in its juridico-political role, violates in its turn, at least potentially, the purity of the ethical desire devoted to the unique."[211] Thus, the singular and universal responsibilities both limit violence and impose their own type of violence. Individually, each is tyrannical; in conjunction they limit each other's excess, yet cannot be reconciled.

Derrida describes the impossibility of distinguishing between the possibility of justice and the possibility of its perversion. He writes that, "this possible hospitality to the worst is necessary so that good hospitality can have a chance, the chance of letting the other come, the *yes* of the other no less than the *yes* to the other."[212] Derrida asserts the necessity of this indeterminancy between the unconditional and the conditional, the beyond politics and the political. Even in politics it is necessary to hold onto this indeterminacy, while attempting to put this indeterminacy into politics. He writes that, "it is necessary also in politics to respect the secret, that which exceeds the political or that

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[211] Derrida, *Adieu*, 33.
[212] Derrida, *Adieu*, 35.

which is no longer in the juridical domain. This is what I would call the 'democracy to come.'"[213]

Alterity and Community

Despite the other's radical alterity, through singularity there is still a sense in which one relates to the other. Although this is a 'relation without relation', as it is for Levinas, singularity involves being directed towards the other. For Kierkegaard, the development of subjectivity directed entirely towards God through the religious sphere allows for a certain kind of relation to God. Abraham's extreme interiority paradoxically allows for access to the greatest exteriority: God. Likewise, Derrida's singularity involves openness to the other which is not possible under a universal conception of subjectivity.

Derrida's conception of singularity involves openness to alterity, since it is from the other that radical responsibility, and thus also individuation, comes. Thus, for Derrida, like Levinas, singularity is the basis for community. However, community must always be based on sacrifice, since attending to the needs of one means neglecting the others. For Derrida, the violence Levinas rejects in Kierkegaard's account of Abraham is an intrinsic part of human society. Derrida understands the foundation of community to rest on responsibility and sacrifice. Singularities, who are irreducibly different, are connected by their shared responsibility. Derrida writes, in "Faith and Knowledge", that

> no community is possible that would not cultivate its own auto-immunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection (that of maintaining its self-integrity intact), and this in view of some sort of invisible and spectral sur-vival. This self-contesting attestation keeps the auto-immune community alive, which is to say, open to something other and more than itself:

[213] Derrida, "On Forgiveness", 55.

> the other, the future, death, freedom, the coming or love of the other, the space and time of a spectralizing messianicity beyond all messianism.[214]

The continual disruption of society keeps it open to the coming of the other: the messianic, or the justice 'to come'. Without this disruption, society would become a totality, subsuming the difference of individuals. Singularity is thus both the way in which a community is joined (through their shared responsibility to the other), as well as the way in which community is dissociated, since each singular individual is absolutely different from all others and their ethical responsibilities are irreducible.

Politics of Exile

Derrida focuses on the outsider, the exile, or the refugee in thinking about politics. Notably, he supports the creation of 'cities of refuge', which, independent of nations, have the autonomy to provide safe haven for refugees.[215] This is not merely an extension of conventional thinking about human rights. Rather, he wishes to disrupt the complacency according to which we may voluntarily provide asylum for those in need, or refuse to do so, according to our own discretion. Building upon Kant's inalienable right of the guest, who has the right to safe passage through any given place by virtue of common humanity, Derrida goes further. He understands hospitality to challenge the privilege of the one at home, arguing that this means "the inhabitant also dwells there as a refugee or an exile, a guest and not a proprietor."[216] In thinking of the outsider, we must also think the outsider among us. Each person, both the neighbour and the stranger, is

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[214] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge", 87.
[215] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism*
[216] Derrida, *Adieu*, 37.

owed our hospitality. We must realize that the neighbour is a stranger, in exceeding our understanding, and the stranger is our neighbour, in being owed the warmest welcome we are capable of.

Since we are all elected in our obligation to others prior to enjoying privileges as citizens, we are a society not of universal subjects but of individuals who are unique in our obligations to others. Derrida describes hospitality as joining together the concepts of fraternity and humanity. Offering refuge to the stranger joins the uniqueness and commonality of self and other in "the welcome of the other or of the face as neighbour and as stranger, as neighbour *insofar* as he is a stranger, man and brother."[217]

Derrida sees human society in terms of a universalized grouping of singularities. This entails a society that is fundamentally open, receptive to difference and to the outsider. Thus, it is not based on similarity but rather on difference. The 'ground' of this society must therefore be deferred, without origin. It is a "community of those without community"[218], a community of outsiders, none of whom are 'at home', none of whom have the right to their land in order to welcome others.

In *Politics of Friendship* Derrida describes democracy as constituting a double bind: we are responsible both to individuals as singular, unique, and irreplaceable, but also generally, to everyone in society as a whole. How can we be friends to our specific friends, while also treating all those whom we do not know personally without prejudice? Derrida writes that there "is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the 'community of friends', without the

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[217] Derrida, *Adieu*, 68.
[218] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 37.

calculating of majorities without identifiable, stablizable, representable subjects, all equal. These two laws are irreducible one to the other."[219] Derrida describes the two poles of responsibility as the unconditional, which requires going beyond what is merely right and accepting infinite obligation to others, and the conditional, or what is universally valid and can be made manifest in law and politics. He states that the two poles are "absolutely heterogeneous, and must remain irreducible to one another. They are nonetheless indissociable... It is between these two poles, *irreconcilable but indissociable*, that decisions and responsibilities are to be taken."[220]

Negotiating between singular responsibility and human universality, Derrida admits, is a daunting task. Nevertheless, he believes that it is urgently necessary. For a society to accept the arrival and settling of foreigners would be proof of "a popular and public commitment, a political *res publica* that cannot be reduced to a sort of 'tolerance,' unless this tolerance requires the affirmation of a 'love' without measure."[221] Derrida believes that this would not take the form of, as Kant conceives of it, a federation of free republics. Rather, it would require going beyond politics.

Universality makes visible what ethics would leave invisible: the transcendent alterity of the other. Politics is inevitably inadequate to the responsibility we owe to the other because it depends on a universal conception of human beings. Political hospitality can only operate under limitations. Unconditional responsibility and absolute openness to the other is beyond the scope of politics. Politics is demanded by ethics, but the content of this politics

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[219] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 22.
[220] Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 44-5.
[221] Derrida, *Adieu*, 72.

> remains undetermined, still to be determined beyond knowledge, beyond all presentation, all concepts, all possible intuition, in a singular way, in the speech and the responsibility *taken* by each person, in each situation, and on the basis of an analysis that is each time unique – unique and infinite, unique but *a priori* exposed to substitution, unique and yet general, interminable in spite of the urgency of the decision."[222]

A Peace to Come

Messianic peace is an alternative to perpetual peace. It relies on the absolute responsibility of the individual rather than the political institutions of nation-states. The singular individual, conceived of in and through responsibility to others, and irreplaceable in this responsibility, is the fulcrum for messianic peace. Unlike perpetual peace, which relies on a universal conception of the subject, messianic peace requires thinking first of responsibility, and rights only secondarily, as derived from that responsibility. Derrida insists that space must remain between "the messianic promise and the determination of a rule, norm, or political law."[223] It is this space that gives us the possibility of speech, and the ability to create a politics that responds to obligation. The space between unique responsibility and general conceptions of rights and duties inspires working in concert with others to achieve political goals. This space between the singular and the universal, or between ethics and law or politics, does not, Derrida argues, give us free reign in the political realm. Although the connection between responsibility and political action is not a clearly determinable one, Derrida does not think that this means anything goes. Rather, the indeterminacy of the connection prevents us from having full certainty in the rightness of our actions. It forces us to be ever vigilant in examining our

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[222] Derrida, *Adieu*, 115.
[223] Derrida, *Adieu*, 117.

actions, looking for ways in which they fail to live up to our responsibility, and searching for ways in which to improve them. Derrida believes it is necessary to open up a political space in which it is possible to grapple with both the possibility of peace and violence. The abstractness of the messianic provides a horizon of peace and justice, yet the actual content of this politics remains open.

Derrida envisions a peace that is not purely political, though it is not apolitical, either. He refers to Levinas' suggestion that peace is a concept that exceeds the political.[224] Peace interrupts itself as the "political interiorization of ethical or messianic transcendence."[225] The State in which peace might prevail would not be a purely political one: it would not exclude religion. This 'going beyond politics' could not be indifferent to politics, however. Derrida's own public interventions would prove to the contrary. Derrida reads Levinas as meaning by 'beyond politics' a "non-messianic politics of the State, which is transgressed toward its beyond by that which nonetheless remains a politics, still a politics, but a messianic politics."[226]

Derrida considers whether this would require an alteration in the way in which we conceive of peace, if we must always be at peace with what is other than ourselves. Peace could not then be a perpetual or continual state, but would require continual re-negotiation and re-interpreting in order to attend always to the responsibility we owe the other. If peace means hospitality to the other, then the roles of host and guest can never become rigid and defined. There must remain ambivalence between who is at home and who is welcomed in order for hospitality to persist. If so, then peace must mean the

[224] Derrida, *Adieu*, 80.
[225] Derrida, *Adieu*, 80.
[226] Derrida, *Adieu*, 74.

continual possibility of war, the continual possibility of rejecting the transcendence of the other.

Derrida reads Kant in order to retrieve a universalism rooted in the groundless ground of singularity. Is Kant's thought compatible with an understanding of singularity? The concept of radical uniqueness requires an expansion in how we think about the value of an individual. According to Kantian universalist ethics, humans have value because of their ability to recognize and choose to follow the moral law, through their autonomous use of reason. However, the emphasis on the individual's responsibility, beyond what can be demanded of any equal human being, and the demand for sacrifice, would appear to be antithetical to Kant's thought. Conceiving of society in terms of openness and responsibility to the outsider requires an increase in what is required from each individual. In his reading of Kant, Derrida demonstrates the necessity of thinking together singularity and universalism, as well as the extreme tension between them. Both loyal and disloyal to Kant's intentions, Derrida provides a deeply ambiguous reading of Kant that holds onto Kant's impetus towards peace while at the same time continually undermining it. Advocating for both singularity and universalism means being completely open to the other, while also recognizing limits on what can be expected of people. Derrida understands the delimitation of the political and the rule of law, to be both impossible and necessary.

Singularity is always an appeal to or intrusion by what is beyond the self, other than the self – what is never fully present and remains always in reserve, but which is always promised, always 'to come'. Derrida opposes the privileging of community as a cohesive whole over the singularity of the other who disrupts that whole. It is what

disrupts the totality that is the condition for relating to the other, and thus for ethics and politics. While Derrida holds onto cosmopolitanism, and hence to an understanding of community as an entity in itself, he wishes to continually disrupt our understanding of community through an understanding of singularity.

Although we are necessarily linked to others through our shared responsibility, this linkage remains an aporetic one. *How* are we to act upon our responsibilities? Derrida describes the moment of decision-making as a 'madness'. There is no grounding for action, and the rule for acting must be developed in the very action itself. However, this groundlessness is no excuse for inaction. Quite the opposite: failure to risk action "can only saturate or suture the opening of the call to justice, a call that is always wounded."[227] The impossibility of deciding how to act requires that we act, and act every time through a reinvention of the rule behind our action. Thus, the aporia Derrida sees between the law and justice itself can never be closed but remains always a spur towards further action and the continual transformation of politics. This is not a distinction between theory and action since Levinas and Derrida both insist upon the irrevocable connection between responsibility and responsible action.

The obligation to the other cannot be carried out in isolation. Singularity from the beginning involves us in relation to what is beyond ourselves. Fulfilling our obligations cannot be carried out privately; it requires society. However, the means by which we carry out our responsibility also imposes further responsibility upon us, because of the countless others to whom we are also obliged. The election by virtue of which we are unique individuals links us to all others whom we must serve. Thus, we must have a

[227] Derrida, "Force of Law", 257.

relationship to all those who are absolutely different from us. This paradoxical situation is not paralyzing but rather exhorts us to action.

Conclusion

Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida all understand the individual in terms of obligation to what is other. Through their conceptions of singularity we see the necessity of recognizing in alterity the demand for responsible action. This is an unceasing demand that the individual persist in a paradoxical condition, balanced between responding to transcendence and generalized responsibility to all persons. The impossibility of such a condition is seen in sacrifice, which is both a gift to the other and an act of violence. The aporetic relationship between singularity and universalism is not mediated or alleviated in the work of these three thinkers. If we accept their descriptions of this relationship, to alleviate this tension would be to veer into either blind brutality, if one attends only to the transcendent other, or complacent herd mentality, if universalism is seen as the limit of one's obligation and the unique appeal of the other is ignored.

Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida all possess understandings of universalism that are deeply informed by singularity. Accepting singularity means that universalism cannot remain unchanged. However, universalism is still important for all three thinkers. They understand universalism as derivative of singularity, conceived of as an orientation to the other. Singularity involves obligation to the radically unique other, who is transcendent and beyond comprehension. This obligation requires action to serve the other. In order to act, some knowledge of the other is necessary. Universalism provides a means to organize our responsibilities to all the others, who are all radically unique but nonetheless must be treated as equals. The problem of reconciling my individual responsibility to all

and for all (to the extent of substituting myself for everyone else) with valuing humans as universal subjects, equally deserving of respect and consideration, is by no means an easy one.

Singularity for the three thinkers examined requires that the individual be understood as radically unique by virtue of her receptiveness to what is other and responsibility towards that otherness. For Kierkegaard, this receptiveness is a gift of world-renewal in which our moral tasks can be resumed. Receptiveness to what radiates from the future opens up possibilities in the present. Kierkegaard's use of the example of Abraham demonstrates how the individual cannot accomplish this on his own. It requires transcendent aid, yet the individual must nevertheless continually labour in order to remain open to its possibility. Similarly, Levinas and Derrida's understanding of the messianic involve an openness to the other, whose coming always remains in abeyance, yet is still integrally related to the present moment, necessitating continual re-examination of responsibility. Explicitly linking the singular other with the plurality of humanity, the messianic as conceived of by Levinas and Derrida provides a way of negotiating the relationship between singularity and universalism in an always aporetic and infinitely demanding way. Like Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida understand time in terms of the coming of the other, in the connection between the messianic 'beyond' from which the other comes, and the present defined as both anticipation and requisite action.

For Kierkegaard, universalism must be transcended through paradox. After ascending Mount Moriah there is a return to human society, but now endless criticism of that society is necessary. After having gone beyond the justifications contained in universal ethics those justifications are no longer absolute. Through entering into a direct

relationship with God, Abraham can never fully trust the universalization of God's word. Although Levinas objects to the privacy of the relationship between Abraham and God in the manner Kierkegaard describes it, transcending all relationships among human beings, nonetheless Levinas also connects humans through God in a certain way. By using the term 'monotheism' to describe how humans are related to each other socially while allowing for difference to be maintained Levinas labels universality as being mediated by God.

While Levinas claims that ethics requires 'loving the Torah more than God'[228], the Torah, representing the moral law, can never be the ultimate answer for Kierkegaard's knight of faith upon return to the finite. Kierkegaard's knight of faith retains the infinite, even though he perfectly executes the movements of the finite. The universal moral law is never fully justified for Kierkegaard. Having entered into a singular relationship with transcendent alterity, the law, which derives from that alterity, must remain continually open to critique.

Derrida reconciles Levinas' criticism of Kierkegaard by providing a new, explicitly ethical reading of Kierkegaard. Derrida interprets Kierkegaard's paradox as involving the simultaneous demands of both the singular, transcendent other, and all of the other others. It is telling that Derrida both asserts that he does not disagree with Levinas, and provides a sympathetic reading of Kierkegaard that contrasts so strikingly with Levinas' criticism.

Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard brings out the role of sacrifice in religion and ethics. Levinas endorses a universalism grounded in singularity, which he terms 'jewish'

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[228] See Levinas' *In the Time of the Nations*.

because rooted in responsibility for a radically unique other. In equating ethics and religion, Levinas may minimize the sacrifice that Derrida and Kierkegaard recognize at the heart of religion. Although Levinas finds human sacrifice abhorrent and rejects Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham and Isaac, he nevertheless requires a singular self-sacrifice in order to ground his theory of society.

Kant's thought does not accord with Derrida's reading, and neither does Kierkegaard's. In translating, or abstracting from, Kierkegaard's reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Derrida moves beyond the personal relation with God that Kierkegaard understands to constitute singularity. Derrida deconstructs in both cases, to find an underlying conflicted relationship between singularity and universalism.

The ways in which singularity is expressed must necessarily be plural and continually re-written. The always-elusive voice of alterity requires continual reinterpretation. Thus, having only one, consistent understanding of singularity would be inadequate. Transcendent alterity is of course a nebulous thing, which must necessarily always be inadequately expressed. What these three thinkers attempt to do is express singularity in a way that is both meaningful universally, to all persons, while also requiring individuals to react in a unique way and develop their own interpretations.

Kierkegaard, Levinas, and Derrida all re-write themselves, continually undoing what they have written and writing it anew. They also all invite others to re-write their work. Instead of developing systematic theories that invite adherence and dogmatism, their writing requires each reader to generate their own understandings. This manner of writing may provide a model of how to understand the relationship between individual responsibility and universal society that Derrida calls the 'universalizable society of

singularities'. Shared understanding must be based upon and allow for uniquely individualized perspectives.

The objection may be raised that singularity separates individuals from each other. In asserting that each person is radically different, human society may be divided and undermined. Rather than basing ethical responsibility on common humanity, singularity bases it on the radical difference between us, which cannot be overcome to allow us to know and understand each other. A relation to the other, for these three thinkers, is an immediate relation, without intermediary, but also without communion.

Whereas Kant sought peace in the gradual integration of a universal human society, Levinas and Derrida seek it in the recognition of difference and the constant disintegration of society. The disintegration they seek is not that of war, but rather of a continual criticism of the ways in which law is calculated. The concept of society as a whole must be constantly questioned in order to open new possibilities for the expression of difference. Being responsible to the other requires re-negotiation and re-invention of ways of interacting with each individual.

Peace cannot simply be the cessation of war. A peace that is simply the suspension of hostility will inevitably erupt into war again. The understanding of sacrifice in Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida helps us to understand the proximity of violence and responsibility to the other. Messianic peace, as Levinas and Derrida understand it, does not involve hoping for deliverance from war, or divine judgement. Instead, it is related to the present, despite its continual violence and conflict. Messianic peace does not involve hoping for justice at the end of history, but demands justice now. The simultaneity of potential violence and arrest of sacrifice in the story of Abraham and

Isaac echoes through these three thinkers' considerations of singularity. Violence appears inevitable, yet the injunction to halt it nevertheless resounds. Ultimately, peace comes only from beyond, from outside the horizon of existence, from transcendence and radical alterity. However, it is also here, in the present, in the instant in which Abraham's hand is stayed.

Ultimately, singularity is not a concept that is easily applied in ethics and politics. However, its vital importance may lie in this difficulty of application. While it inspires systematization, it also undercuts all attempts to do so, requiring a conception of society as inherently open to the other, divided by difference, receptive to the outsider. Because singularity requires a constant rethinking of obligation, it forces us to always be examining anew the needs of others and attempting to address those needs in new ways. Thus, singularity may not provide a foundation for the formulation of concrete political theory in the way various forms of universalism have. Singularity demands continual re-negotiation of the ways in which we think of obligation and community. It requires us to recognize that responsibility to others is a precarious balance in which the knife blade is dangerously close to the throat of the other. Singularity might be thought of as a never fully intelligible demand from a source we cannot identify; nevertheless, it possesses the force of an obligation. Although this obligation is imposed upon us without our willing it, it nonetheless becomes a part of us, since we are who we are by virtue of our obligations to others.

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