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JACQUES DERRIDA ON RELIGION AND UNIVERSALIZING FAITH:

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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**Abstract:** This article examines critically Jacques Derrida's view of religion and sacrificial ethics as placed between Immanuel Kant's and Søren Kierkegaard's conceptions of faith. To overcome their one-sidedness, Derrida advances a paradoxical view of religion and ethics that entails the undialecticizable tension between a universalizing (Kantian) "moment" and a singularizing (Kierkegaardian) one. I will propose, first, a reading of Derrida's conception that is neither atheist nor religious. Second, I will argue that Derrida's transformative deconstruction of religion and ethics is suggestive but not persuasive: in particular, Derrida's quasi-transcendental argumentative strategy in favor of a universalizing faith replaces the "essence" with a unique paradox. The resulting paradoxology remains metaphysical and ahistorical: disregarding the historical evolution of religious imagination (Bellah, 2017), Derrida monothematically injects philosophical abstractions into the heart of communicative practices. Moreover, I argue that, Derrida's concern with otherness notwithstanding, it is parochial and at odds with ethical and religious pluralism.

**Key words:** religion, faith, ethics, paradox, Jacques Derrida, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard.

## 1. Introduction: Derrida's paradoxology

Jacques Derrida's paradoxical view of religion can be usefully placed between Immanuel Kant's and Søren Kierkegaard's contrasting philosophies. Kant develops an influential project of reconciliation between Enlightenment and religion, practical reason and faith that is echoed in the mainstream views of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls (Habermas 2008; Rawls 1993). Quite the opposite, Kierkegaard exalts absolute singularity, Otherness, and paradox, and posits the impossibility of reconciliation between reason and unconditional faith, universal morality and religion. From a Derridean perspective, these two metaphysical conceptions are the mirror image of each other. I suggest that, in order to overcome their one-sidedness, Derrida advances a paradoxical view of religion and ethics that entails the undialecticizable tension between a universalizing-Kantian moment and a singularizing-Kierkegaardian one. This leads Derrida to champion a transformative conception of religion and ethics that challenges a mainstream view based on the strict contrast between practical reason and duty, on the one hand, and unconditional faith and religious sacrifice, on the other (Derrida 1994; 2002; Caputo 1997a).

How persuasive is Derrida's paradoxical approach to religion, and the way it shapes his view of practical reason and ethics? In the following, I clarify and criticize key aspects of Derrida's "intermediate" approach to religion and ethics in three steps, arguing that it cannot be boxed either in the atheist camp (Hägglund 2008) or in the religious one (Caputo 1997a). First, I reconstruct Derrida's re-appropriation of Kant's view of the two sources of religion and universal or moral faith. Derrida's notion of a universalizing faith mainly derives from a specific view of communicative practices that draws on the speech act theory (I). Second, I deal with Derrida's analysis of Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham's sacrifice, and its consequences for his sacrificial ethics (II). Third, I examine critically Derrida's paradoxical conception of religion and sacrificial ethics arguing that, despite its suggestiveness, it remains parochial and at odds with ethical-religious pluralism (III).

It is essential to underscore that Derrida's philosophical interpretations are neither merely exegetic nor textual but "quasi-phenomenological": their key purpose is to unearth paradoxes hidden in the existing communicative practices (e.g. religious, ethical, political). "Quasi-phenomenological" means, first, that Derrida does not pretend to extract the "essence" of the communicative practice under analysis, but to unveil paradoxical conditions of possibility of practices that are at once conditions of impossibility (see later); Derrida's paradoxes have an analogous structure constituted by two poles, i.e. conditionality and

unconditionality that are unveiled, time and again, in particular in Derrida's late writings, including in his analyses of religion and ethics (Caputo 1997a, 1997b; Howells 1999; Critchley 1992; Gutting 2001; Sherwood and Hart 2005; Ungureanu 2008; 2013). Second, "quasi-phenomenological" refers to Derrida's emphasis on the the historicity and contextuality of his analyses. In this sense, Derrida admits that his approach to religion and ethics might be the expression of a specific monotheist context: the "quasi-phenomenological" paradoxology underscores that the tension between philosophical analysis and historical context cannot be ultimately overcome.

## 2. Universalizing faith and the two sources of religion: the Kantian "moment"

In contrast to Habermas' and Rawls' re-appropriations of Kant, Derrida engages with his reflections on faith and the two sources of religion. Kant poses the following question: how is it possible to conceptualize faith and religion within the boundaries of reason? To answer this question, Kant distinguishes between two strata or sources of religion: historical and dogmatic faith, on the one hand, and rational and moral faith, on the other. By historical religion, Kant refers to the faith in contingent religious precepts (dogmas, rituals, and "outer" institutional forms (i.e., the church). The historical faith takes different forms. For instance, there is one type of religion—Kant calls it "*religion of rogation* (of mere cult)"—that consists *only* of faith in contingent or accidental elements. The religion of mere cult does not support the moral and rational improvement of human beings but merely "flatters" God by way of observing rituals (Kant 2001).

While some historical religions are based only on dogmatic faith, others involve a universal faith (or rational or moral faith, which for Kant amounts to the same). This universal faith has a determinate content: it is faith in moral or rational precepts, i.e. in those precepts that are *per definitionem* eternal, necessary, and universal; this faith is, further, centred on God as "moral ruler of the world" (Kant 2001, 6.109). Such faith is universal as it aspires to a "union of hearts" under the same God, a "union under no other incentives than moral ones" (Kant 2001, 6.101). While there is a multiplicity of historical faiths, there is only *one* rational faith, one God, and a single set of universal moral imperatives in virtue of being equally endowed with the same faculty of reason. From this perspective, Kant's answer to the starting question is that a religion within the bounds of reason is a religion founded on rational faith. The historical religion that is eminently rational is, in Kant's view, Christianity. He calls it a "religion of *good life-conduct*" (Kant 2001, 6: 101), by which he means a religion that supports the moral improvement and progress of humanity.

While Christianity's inner essence is rational faith and morality, its outer form is made up of contingent, accidental elements that represent a symbolic cover (e.g. rituals, commandments, dogmas; Kant 2001, 6.50). However, in the Christian universal religion, the symbolic cover has a rational kernel: the Christian commandments can be translated into universal-moral precepts, i.e. the categorical imperatives.

Kant's analysis of the two strata of religion has *transformative implications* with respect to religious practices and institutions. The Christian institutions have oftentimes *stifled* its core, namely rational faith and universal morality. Not all Christian churches are compatible with a free republic based on citizen's rational autonomy and faith. In particular, the Catholic Church and the institutions fostering religious fanaticism undermine rational faith by way of the "nonsense of superstition" and the "madness of enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*)" (Kant 2001, 6.50). In contrast, the proper Church is built on the "heart's disposition to observe all human duties as divine commands" (Kant 2001, 6.6). The Christian Church needs to throw away the ballast of those historical manifestations that are odds with the idea and practice of a "religion of good conduct". This transformation is vital for politics: the frailty of rational will of the members of the political community makes so that the political enterprise requires religion of good conduct with its unconditional divine commandments and church authority.

Kant's dichotomist conception of religion runs into significant difficulties. His view of the core of religion as moral and rational, and of a version of Christianity as the superior form of religion is reductionist (i.e. religion is reduced to one moral vocabulary) and at odds with the plurality of religious practices. With the (undeserved) benefit of hindsight, Kant's conception emerges as essentialist and parochial – a version of a familiar form of the Eurocentric metaphysical discourse. Derrida aims to take distance from privileging Christian monotheism, and from conceptualizing religion in metaphysical terms (e.g. moral essence/accident, eternal/historical). However, Derrida follows in Kant's footsteps on key points. His most sustained treatment of religion, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone" (Derrida 1998) is guided by a Kantian interrogation as to how to reflect on religion in rational and universal terms. Derrida's answer echoes Kant in distinguishing two strata or sources of religion (conditional and unconditional faith), and in pleading for a religious transformation in order to give voice to a universalizing faith often stifled by dogmatic faith.

The first stratum corresponds to Kant's historical faith or religion: in Derrida's interpretation, this is the stratum of religion that pertains to the order of conditionality; the conditional faith presupposes a drive to closure, immunization, and sacralisation of beliefs, images, places, objects, or practices. Derrida's claim is not that this stratum of religion is per se accidental, superficial, or inferior. At its best, it takes the form of a rich

pluralism of religious manifestations and practices. At its worst, it refers to faith in dogmas and institutions that are safeguarded by authoritarian powers.

Second, there is a “faith without dogma” (Derrida 1998, 61; Derrida 2002, 2005), which pertains to the order of unconditionality (or, in Derrida’s language: infinity, gratuity, incalculability, or the aneconomic). Unconditional faith does not have, like Kant’s rational or moral faith, a determinate content; it is not faith in moral precepts, gods, angels, spirits, divine representations, dogmas. Unconditional faith is neither moral, nor rational, nor universal per se. However, Derrida’s argument is that unconditional faith is what is universalizable about religion, and what is “at the border of reason”. Derrida develops this notion of unconditional faith by means of a quasi-phenomenological argument with respect to communicative practices (e.g. ethical, religious, political); he resorts to the tools of the linguistic and the pragmatic turns so as to overcome Kant’s view centred on an individual, ahistorical, and disembodied reason rooted in a metaphysically postulated *noumenal* world (Kant 2001; Caputo 1997). In developing the speech act theory, Derrida argues that communicative exchanges constitutive of *social bonds* involve raising validity claims (i.e. a promise of justice and truth) that can be only approximated and not fulfilled by existing reason-exchanges and concrete acts. In other words, they involve a mutual pledge between communicators, an act of unconditional faith that transcends the order of conditionality, and involves a promise of truth, justice, or validity. As Derrida states with respect to this promissory or messianic dimension of communicative exchange, “the minute I open my mouth I am in the promise. Even if I say ‘I don’t believe in truth’ . . . the minute I open my mouth there is a ‘believe me’ at work. Even if I lie, and perhaps especially when I lie, there is a ‘believe me’ in play. And this ‘I promise you that I am telling the truth’ is a messianic a priori, a promise which, even if it is not kept, even if one knows that it cannot be kept, takes place and qua promise is messianic/unconditional” (Derrida 1996, 81). This basic fiduciary dimension of communicative practices constitutes the condition of possibility of religion, and what is universalizable about it. The unconditional faith may be dissociated from specific historical Messianisms (e.g. Christian, Judaic, Islamic): it is premised on the infinite deferral of the arrival of Messiah, and of the realization of the full meaning of truth or justice to the other: “(t)he universalizable culture of this faith, and not of another before all others, alone permits a rational and universal discourse on the subject of ‘religion’” (Derrida 2002, 56–57).

This line of argumentation differs from Kant’s reconciling view of faith and reason, and is meant to have transformative impact on religion and religious institutions by opening them to justice and difference (see II). The promissory “structure” of communicative acts makes possible a rational and universalizable discourse on religion yet it can be stifled by

religious dogmas and hierarchies. Thus, for Derrida, religious experience and practice must assume this radical opening without stifling the undialecticizable tension or paradox between conditional and unconditional faith, historical religion and the faith in the promise of justice. In contrast, Kant aimed to encircle faith *within* the limpid and clear boundaries of a rational system or straightjacket at odds with ethical religious pluralism and the promissory opening inherent in communicative exchanges and social bonds. It is only at this cost that Kant's Enlightenment project managed to *reconcile* religion and reason, faith and moral knowledge. In turn, for Derrida "faith" is *at the border* (neither within nor outside) of reason and knowledge (Howells 1999; Caputo 1997b; Derrida 2005). Unconditional faith (the promissory, the messianic) as dimension of communicative exchanges cannot be circumscribed by any conception of reason or religion (Kant 2001; Habermas 2008), as it at once makes possible and "pierces" the current horizon of reason and the workings of any totalizing system or universalism. Derrida's reflections on Kierkegaard, singularity, sacrifice, and absolute otherness supplement his examination of Kant and universalizing faith.

### 3. Otherness, singularity, and sacrificial ethics: the Kierkegaardian "moment"

Derrida's interpretative choice of Abraham's story in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* so as to clarify his view of faith and ethics is surprising and provocative, as it dwells on a story that epitomized for different Enlightenment thinkers what was most abhorrent about religion: what could be more rigorously at odds with ethical duty and rational autonomy than Abraham's decision to kill his own beloved son at God's incomprehensible command?

In *Fear and Trembling* (1983), Kierkegaard does not dilute, but intensifies the dramatic elements of the story of Abraham, and the contradiction between the moral-rational duty and faith. Abraham's passionate faith in God withstood the most "maddening" and "impossible" tests. After giving Abraham the miracle of Isaac, God ordered him: "take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you" (Kierkegaard 1983, 19). God became utterly incomprehensible for Abraham who plunged into utter despair. Yet, Abraham's passionate faith in God and in the "child of promise" remained completely unshaken. Kierkegaard argues: Abraham "...had faith by the virtue of absurd, for human calculation was out of question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement" (Kierkegaard 1983, 35-36). When Abraham was just about to sacrifice Isaac, God intervened and "gave" him his son for the second time, in spite of all

expectancy, calculation and hope: “(n)o doubt – comments Kierkegaard - he (Abraham) was surprised at the outcome...” (Kierkegaard 1983, 35-36).

Abraham’s story reveals, for Kierkegaard, the “essence” of faith and its contradiction with the order of morality. Since God is the Absolute Other, faith in Him is manifested with utmost purity only in the moment of exception - when it flies in the face of all worldly knowledge and reason. Abraham is “the father of faith” because he stayed completely unshaken in his faith even when he was to go against the most natural inclinations (love of his son) and the most deep-seated moral commandments. Pure Abrahamic faith cannot be shared or “reconciled” by way of universal norms of moral reason and language, but it represents a moment of absolute singularity of the believer in front of God (Kierkegaard 1983, 60).

Kierkegaard turns upside down the Kantian-Hegelian belief in reconciliation between morality and faith, Enlightenment and religion, by means of “exalting” faith, singularity and exception as “superior” and “essential” to moral duty or rule. For Kierkegaard “(f)aitth is precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal... This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation takes place only by virtue of the universal; it is and remains for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought” (Kierkegaard 1983, 55-56). The singular moment of faith destroys and is superior to the universality of the moral rule: faith is not rational, but absurd, mad, and a paradox. In interpreting Kierkegaard’s paradoxical story, Derrida is not interested in a simple exegesis nor in a textual analysis, but in what Kierkegaard’s text tells us about religious and ethical practices. In this sense, the analysis of practice and gift giving and of Kierkegaard’s text on Abraham’s sacrificial gift to God complement each other, and illuminate existing practices (textual or non-textual). In reading *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida does not embrace Kierkegaard’s exceptionalist metaphysics – the belief in the superiority and “essentiality” of the singular over the universal, of the exception over the moral rule. This exceptionalism is, from a Derridean perspective, but the mirror image of the traditional rationalist metaphysics. However, from Derrida’s standpoint, there is something morally significant to learn from Kierkegaard’s religious philosophy, and its stress on singularity, sacrifice, and unconditional faith. As Derrida argues, the communicative relations to the other always involves an “interruption” of finite knowledge, i.e. moment of unconditionality or incalculability. As there is no pure and direct intuition of the other, he/she “punctures” the horizon of the finite, determinate knowledge. Derrida argues that since “I never have any access to the other as such”, the other is “infinitely other”, singular and exceptional (Derrida 1999, 31; Ungureanu 2019). The argument is not that there is no knowledge about the other whatsoever: faith and knowledge, the order of unconditionality and conditionality are co-dependent. For Derrida, the unique and irreplaceable other becomes

known only in the context of practices governed by general rules and categories of meaning. However, as the other is not completely representable, there is at all times an untranslatable remainder of singularity and secrecy that escapes finite and knowledge. This entails that the ethical relation to the other is paradoxical: the other's call of moral justice is infinite or unconditional, but it can be answered only in terms of finite or conditional moral duties and capacities (Ungureanu, 2013b).

Second, not only that the other "punctures" the finite (or conditioned) horizon of knowledge, but there is an overflowing plurality of others. The non-representability of the other in addition to the overflowing plurality of others generates, for Derrida, a moral-political condition marked by "maddening" aporias or paradoxes, namely by the existence of imperatives that go in opposite directions, and no definite criteria to find reconciling solutions. Derrida has been mistakenly criticized as an advocate of *generalized indeterminacy*: the moral condition is marked, in contrast, by *overdetermination* – namely of an overabundance of moral "calls". Derrida argues: "... (t) here are... others, in infinite number, the innumerable generality of others, to whom the same responsibility should bind me, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). ... Every other is quite other [tout autre est tout autre]. The simple concepts of alterity and singularity are constitutive of the concept of duty as such as that of responsibility. They lend, a priori, the concepts of responsibility, decision and duty to paradox, scandal and aporia" (Derrida 1995a: 6). As a result, in Derrida's ethics, complying with one's moral duties and responsibility cannot but entail the "risk of infinite sacrifice" of the faith in or promise of justice: our finitude or conditionality makes so we can answer the others' call for justice only in dramatically insufficient ways. Derrida urges us, in contrast to the complacencies of common sense and moral theories, to assume that the everyday moral condition is sacrificial or "Abrahamic". Thereby Derrida does not simply reject the Kantian-Habermasian view of rational autonomy (Ungureanu 2019). For him, there is no pure rational autonomy in "total control": duty and responsibility presuppose going through the experience of "a duty beyond duty" – i.e. assuming the "ordeal" of an unsolvable paradox. In being responsible towards the other, there is always a moment of heteronomy and a leap of faith with respect to the prescribed ethical duties (Critchley 1992, Ungureanu, 2013b). In other words, for Derrida there is no relation of rigid opposition between autonomy and heteronomy, reason and faith, universal rule and singularity, but one of permanent, undialecticisable tension. In Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard: "(a)s soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrifices whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. I offer a *gift of death*, I betray, I don't need to raise my knife over my son on



Mount Moriah for that. Day and night, at every instant, on all Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably” (Derrida 1995a, 68).

#### 4. Limits of Derrida’s approach to religion and sacrificial ethics

Derrida’s call for opening religion to otherness, difference is appealing particularly in the context of the rise of religious fundamentalism and nationalist populism. Moreover, Derrida’s deconstruction usefully questions a secularist narrative that rigidly opposes faith and reason, religion and secularism, and that is at the core of mainstream views such as Rawls’ and Habermas’. At a basic level, Derrida usefully highlights that faith is involved in social bonds and communicative relations, and is irreducible to reason-exchanges and abstract-rational procedures. Derrida’s reflections on sacrificial ethics are also a way of problematizing the common opposition between practical reason and faith. Derrida’s conception of ethics combining a Kantian and a Kierkegaardian moment is suggestive in challenging moral self-complacencies in a global age in which individuals have access to an overabundance of unattended moral calls. From this perspective, the border between knowledge and faith, of what we can do, morally speaking, and of what we cannot, is not self-assured and transparent: fulfilling the duty towards the others may involve a “leap of faith”, and the realization that one is capable of doing things that she has never envisaged before. Derrida’s sacrificial ethics can be regarded as a plea for expansion of ethical imagination is particularly suggestive in a morally over-determined context in which mass media and Internet bring instantaneously to our attention the drama of countless “distant” others.

However, Derrida’s *specific* understanding of faith and ethical-religious paradoxes runs into intractable conceptual and practical difficulties. While socio-communicative bonds and speech acts involve mutual trust or faith, Derrida goes on to infer implausibly the interconnected ideas of unconditional faith, Messianism, and a “universalizing culture of singularities”. This quasi-phenomenological argumentative step is unconvincing as it brackets the relevance of history and religious historical development (Bellah 2017; Taylor 2007). His acknowledgment that the quasi-phenomenology cannot overcome the dialectic between philosophical analysis and historical context remains abstract: in his analysis, Derrida injects notions that are at the centre of universalist Abrahamic religions into linguistic and religious practices as such.

However, universal faith, Messianism, unconditional justice are notions that pertain to a *recently developed religious-moral imagination*, and that are not “deducible” from the speech act theory itself; they are

connected to what Robert Bellah calls “theoretical religion”, which is characterized by its capacity of abstractization and universalization; this religious form is very recent in the long history of religion (Bellah 2017).

Derrida’s view of religion is, moreover, at odds with religious pluralism. Derrida implies that an “authentic” ethical-religious experience means assuming the paradox between unconditional and conditional faith. But this agonistic view of religion is an example of *parochialism*; it projects on all valid religious experiences a yearning to unconditionality and absolute otherness more proper to the Abrahamic religions (or, rather, to a specific understanding thereof). In the final analysis, Derrida’s interpretive gesture echoes Kant’s or Kierkegaard’s parochial focus on a specific understanding of Christianity. The pathos for maddening paradoxes is not the proper of Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other forms of religiosity. To illustrate, in Confucianism, the quest for human excellence (*jen*) within a well-ordered social order has little to do with this dramatic pathos of the Derridean “model” of ethical-religious experience. The Confucian sense of *balance*, *reciprocity*, and *social order* is far from the Derridean tormented subject living at the mad risk of decisions and dilemmas. *The Analects* contains the following dialogue that conveys the idea of the Confucian ethos based on reciprocity: “Zi Gong [a disciple] asked: “Is there any one word that could guide a person throughout life?” The Master replied: “How about 'reciprocity'! Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself”. A Confucian would be struck by the description of her ethos in terms of non-reciprocity and Messianism without Messianism: she would have good reasons to regard Derrida’s generalization as context-bound and parochial. Ironically, while Derrida exalts difference and otherness, his deconstruction of religion and ethics is at odds with the existing pluralism of practices and experiences.

Derrida’s deconstruction is not fully persuasive even as a transformative analysis of Abrahamic faiths. Interpreting the *variety* of understandings of religious experience and freedom through the prism of *one* major paradox results unappealing. The root difficulty is conceptual and practical: Derrida’s view of religion turns relevant tensions inside religious and ethical life to the status of a major paradox between conditionality and unconditional faith. This paradox not only cannot be “inferred” by quasi-phenomenological means, but it is also residual of essentialist metaphysics. In spite of Derrida’s well-known criticism of essentialist metaphysics as “metaphysics of presence”, his view is reminiscent of it. Differences apart, Derrida replaces what once was the “essence” with the paradox. Derrida’s view is still residual of an old philosophical gesture of reducing multiplicity of practice to one principle as he cuts down the innumerable *variety* of ethical and religious practices - some of which being marked by dilemmas, while others being not - to *one* key logic, namely the logic of the paradox between conditionality and unconditionality. But duties and responsibilities are part of the grammar of an

irreducible variety of language games, which not all of them involve maddening paradoxes or dilemmas.

Moreover, the Derridean paradox is not formulated in a persuasive way. The claim that unconditionality or gratuity is annulled by self-seeking interest, narcissistic desire or the imposition of a prescribed duty is unproblematic (Ungureanu 2013a). There is nothing specifically Derridean about this common-sense claim. However, Derrida advances a much more radical view that implausibly breaks with the common sense and the pre-comprehension he invokes in the first place: according to him, the process of self-identification and identification characterizing the communicative relation *conditions* it; in so doing, it generates an “economic circle” that makes gratuity impossible. As Derrida puts it with reference to gift-giving, “the *very* self-identification of me as a donor, of the gift as a gift and the receiver as a receiver destroys the gratuity of gift-giving....” (Derrida 1992, 23; Ungureanu 2013).

This radical view is questionable. The simple recognition does not necessarily involve a self-seeking interest or a self-congratulatory emotion. Derrida’s procedure is to place under the same heading very different if not opposed phenomena - the simple recognition of a book as a gift, the egoistic interest and sadistic pleasures of a slave owner, or a soldier’s self-sacrificial gift to save his companions in a battle. Derrida stretches so much the borders of the “conditionality” or the “economic” that it becomes a *catchall concept* (Ungureanu 2013b). To this counterintuitive concept of “conditionality” there corresponds a “purist” understanding of “unconditionality”. Yet this injection of a metaphysical purism into the heart of common practices leads to Derrida’s characteristically paradoxical phrasings that abound in his writings on religion, morality, and politics: “I can no more say, “I forgive” than “I give”. These are impossible statements. I can always make them, but in doing so, I betray what I mean to say, I am not saying anything, I should never be able to say, “I’m giving” or “I’m forgiving” (Derrida 2007, 450).

Inflating “conditionality” can lead counterintuitive but also hubristic re-descriptions of practical instances. Consider the real-life case of the death of the Romanian Christian thinker Mircea Vulcănescu in a communist prison. In Vulcănescu’s cell all the political prisoners were forced to sleep on the cold and wet floor. As a cell companion had pneumonia, Vulcănescu offered to sleep on the floor with the sick man on top of his body. As a result, Vulcănescu fell ill and eventually passed away. Now, a Derridean re-description would argue that the very recognition of the receiver annuls the gratuity of the sacrificial gift, all the more when this act is inspired by Christian ideas. But this re-description verges on dubious moralism. Saying that such a “sacrificial gift” was not gratuitous merely because Vulcănescu *identified* the “receiver” of their gift or that he was inspired by his Christian ideas flies in the face of common sense in

addition to denting the moral reverence and humbling awe elicited by such admirable acts.

One may indeed discover hidden reasons that “tinge” heroic acts. Take the case of a soldier who gives his life by throwing himself over an exploding grenade so as to save his nearby comrades. Suppose that it turns out that the soldier was a spy who knew that he had just been discovered and would be executed anyways. One can never be absolutely sure that a gift or a morally admirable action is gratuitous. But the trivial point that we can never be completely certain that a gift or a moral action is gratuitous needs not be inflated into a hyperbolic rhetoric of necessary paradoxes and impossibility. This excessive rhetoric does not bring an explanatory gain in such cases, but counter-intuitively and moralizingly re-describes *ex cathedra* admirable acts as impossible (Ungureanu, 2013a).

Cases of ethically gratuitous or unconditional acts are not necessarily exceptional. Consider how many parents sacrifice, in dire conditions, (part of) their well-being so as to raise children. While it is important to study the processes of socialization whereby parents *are* more prone to adopt behavioral patterns towards their children, people have a “margin of freedom” as to the moral sacrifices they make. It is counterintuitive to say that the gratuity of sacrifice is annulled by the parents’ recognition of their children, or by their feelings of love towards them. Quite the opposite, it is the recognition of children as *theirs*, and the feelings of love towards *them* that grants moral meaning to their sacrifice, gift, and dedication without making them impossible. While it is true that certain emotions put into question the gratuity of gift-giving as a parent – e.g. being driven by the vanity to see one’s child in a high-status position –, denying the gratuity of sacrifices because of the (reciprocal or non-reciprocal) emotions of love, care and tenderness towards one’s children verges on an unnatural moralism. It is more plausible to admit that certain forms of recognition, emotions and convictions are *constitutive* to ethical relations without rendering them “impossible” (Ungureanu 2013a).

Derrida’s sacrificial ethics is, moreover, over-demanding if not self-defeating. The hyperbolic language of paradoxes is not of much help to interpret a number of common situations. There is little explanatory or normative gain in re-describing a good deal of our fallible moral life in such over-dramatized terms. Derrida’s view runs the risk of delegitimizing a good deal of common practices (moral or not). Common activities – fulfilling daily moral obligations towards one’s family and friends, teaching, hiking, reading a novel, giving a present to one’s partner, studying at the University, teaching philosophy, and so on lose any moral justification when put in balance with the call of the millions who are now suffering. However, the possibility of solidarity towards strangers is premised on the existence of a moral culture made of common activities. The formation of solidarity inclinations is not the result of abstract philosophical argumentation, but of embedded processes of socialization,

education, and acculturation. These inclinations grow slowly within the family, school, neighborhood, religious community and the political community: extending solidarity beyond these borders is premised on “circles of recognition” and solidarity towards those who are familiar and known (Singer 1981; Sandel 2006). The Derridean paradoxology runs the risk of destroying the existing moral tissue and so the very roots of the solution of the problem at hand – the roots of a desirable expansion of ethical imagination in times of polarization and the global rise of national populism and religious fundamentalism.

## 5. Conclusion

Derrida’s view of religion and sacrificial ethics centered on assuming maddening paradoxes is not a persuasive basis for re-conceptualizing the variety religious and ethical practices (Ungureanu 2013b). Apart from the conceptual problems of this analysis that echoes an essentialist metaphysics, it is difficult to imagine that a great number of believers would be able to assume on a daily basis the high-risk drama of the Abrahamic condition. At the core of Derrida’s paradoxology “(l)ong before the experience of what is called the sacrifice, even before going up to Mount Moriah, there is terror: Abraham has to choose between two equally beloved sons. That’s a terrible experience. And we experience it every day” (Derrida 1994: 80). This existential mood can be the basis of an admirable personal ethics, but it is neither deducible from a quasi-phenomenological analysis of practice (instead, it appears to be the echo of a *specific* religious heritage) nor is it generalizable to other spiritual-religious practices (e.g. Buddhist, Confucian). Moreover, Derrida’s paradoxology is over-burdening for the majority of people; ironically, the concern with the suffering of the infinity of the others entails – his best intentions notwithstanding – an ethical-religious elitism. Derrida’s view of unconditional faith and sacrifice is ethically and religiously so demanding that it is suited only for a minority of “moral heroes” capable of assuming the “madness” of the Abrahamic condition. The deconstruction is suggestive in shedding light on the inner tensions of religion as well as on the porous borders between religion and ethics, yet it would benefit from abandoning the fixation on a master paradox and from drawing on a more comparative and pluralist approach to ethical-religious practices.

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