POETICS OF EXCLUSION: DERRIDA AND THE INJUNCTIONS OF MODERNITIES

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In this paper I consider Derrida's anathematization during the 1992 "Cambridge affair" in the light of the 1270 and 1277 condemnations of unorthodox philosophical theses by the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, the inventor of double truth. In particular, I compare these two occurrences through a reading of modernities as a re-centring on the new orthodoxy of naturalistic ontology, which began to take place in the 17th century. After the Humean attack, Kant recast such a naïve naturalistic objectivity into a more defensible shape, by internalizing the supposed universal spatio-temporal structure of Newtonian physics as transcendental conditions of possibility. Though the Kantian ontological and theological legacy is still detectable in Derrida's quasi-concept of iterability, Derrida's theoretical contributions well exceed metaphysical discourse. More generally, I argue that during the last fifty years these contributions, together with contemporary reconsiderations of modernities, produced an emerging theoretical region. Within this region, the metaphysical chain of substitution of centre for centre is displaced, so that we can evaluate practices of exclusion without having to rely on alternative injunctions.

The year: 1270. The place: Paris. The bishop Etienne Tempier singles out as heretic doctrines 13 propositions relating to the writings of contemporary authors, who are inspired by recent translations into Latin of the works of Aristotle and his main commentator Ibn Rushd, better known in Christian Europe as Averroes.

The same place, seven years after: Tempier widens his catch, and this time proscribes 219 propositions. Among them, there are state-

1 Tempier's condemnation was completely anonymous: he only mentioned "nonnulli Parisius studentes in artibus," that is, some Parisian scholars of arts, as "proprie facultatis limites excedentes," that is, transgressing the limits of their own faculty.

ments that can be referred to an author who is to become one of the Doctors of the Church: Thomas Aquinas.

Tempier claims that the 219 propositions are incompatible with Christian doctrine. Moreover, he declares that the heretical propositions pit reason against faith “quasi sint duae contrariae veritates,” as if they were two opposing truths. As a matter of fact, neither Ibn Rushd nor his Christian readers ever advocated such an opposition. Hence, Tempier should be given credit for conjuring up the theory of double truth, as a theoretical pluralism yet to be endorsed.

Let us now travel again in space and time. London, 9 May 1992. The Times (London) publishes an appeal, drafted by Barry Smith and signed by nineteen academics, including such well-known scholars as the physicist René Thom and the analytic philosophers Ruth Barcan Marcus and Willard Van Orman Quine. We all know that academics join forces to take a stance in the public arena only for serious and compelling reasons. The specific impending catastrophe that pushes the nineteen academics to act is the announced conferring by Cambridge University of an honorary degree on abstruse theorist Jacques Derrida.

The signatories of the appeal feel the urge to notify the public that Derrida’s work does not meet “accepted standards of clarity and rigour,” and that Derrida’s “semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship” are not “sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university.” Moreover, the letter is addressed to The Times as a contribution to an alleged public debate.

Let us now come back from our travel in space and time in order to compare these two historical occurrences from a contemporary perspective. While the French bishop questioned the theoretical stances of not explicitly identified authors, the drafters of the letter imputed to Derrida the absence of a meaningful theoretical stance. Moreover, the injunctions of Tempier appear to be quite different from a public declaration on media. The bishop did not simply express an authoritative opinion, but he asserted the immediate per-

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3 Ibid., 13.
formative power of his theological statements, which he claimed immediately expelled from orthodoxy their theoretical targets.

Given the bad press that the so-called dark ages received from four centuries of modernities, we could be tempted to accept Tempier’s claim. And yet, medieval historians would caution us about such a quick acceptance. For example, Jacques Le Goff underlined the constitutive function of inscriptions, which also construed the very powers they were meant to describe. Moreover, Carlo Ginzburg narrated both the differing and the deferring of inquisitorial trials. Hence, I suggest considering Tempier’s declarations as an attempt (which was to be successful) to assert on behalf of the papacy its universal jurisdiction over the domain of Christian and Western thought.

More generally, the claim of the immediate performativity of papal declarations was the major ideological weapon of the medieval Papal Revolution, whose beginning textbooks generally define as the Gregorian Reform. According to the papal revolutionaries, the universal authority of the pope as god’s legal representative on earth mirrored the immediate universality of god’s authority. In other words, by structuring reality on theological principles, these medieval popes and canonists took the order of things as a witness to their theocratic project. In particular, both the space of theological orthodoxy and its excluded ones, namely heretics and non-orthodox thinkers in general, witnessed the legitimacy of papal discourse. I wrote “witnessed,” and not “granted,” because only god was supposed to grant anything.

While modern discourses took shape in a theological cradle, their 17th-century devisers chose as a witness a specific configuration of the order of things, which they constructed as the world of natural facts. The supposed immediate commonality of this natural world later allowed modern thinkers to bestow onto immanence the “treasures formerly squandered on heaven” without altering the

monolithic structure of postclassical European thought. In the course
of a process that sped up in the last two centuries, the monolingual-
ism of theology, which shipwrecked after the Reformation, was
salvaged as a naturalistic monolingualism. In other words, nature
came to reoccupy, borrowing the term from Blumenberg11, the
central position attributed to ideas or being by classical ontology and
to god by theological systems.12

Indeed, the modern natural world not only displaced all pre-
modern conceptual centres, but also produced a shift in the very
character of conceptual centres. In the attempt to reconcile their
demand for certainty with the improvability of knowledge, modern
theorists retreated to method. Though Paul Feyerabend convincingly
challenged on historical grounds the narrative of method even in the
domain of the hard sciences13, rigour and clarity still witness the
legitimacy of modern naturalistic discourse. I wrote “witness,” and
not “grant,” because only nature is supposed to grant the legitimacy
of naturalism.

For modern method fundamentalists, the accusation of not meet-
ing accepted standards of clarity and rigour implies much more than
a mere issue of style. Nevertheless, they cannot plainly declare that
clarity and rigour are the fundamental rules of their language game
because they cannot renounce the presence of nature, that is, na-
ture’s factual out-there-ness, or at least the more rarefied out-there-
ness of reason and truth. That’s why the drafters of the letter had to
engage with the contents of Derrida’s allegedly impenetrable writ-
ings. Let’s make no mistake about the nature of this engagement,
which was intended to rhetorically justify the public exclusion of
Derrida from the community of philosophers.

The rhetorical strategies at work in the medieval and the modern
inscriptions are related to two different regimes of enunciation.
These different regimes are expressed by two specific strategies of
exclusion. In order to emphasize the constructive role of these strat-
egies, I will define them as poetics of exclusion, by analogy with

11 Blumenberg suggested replacing the concept of secularization with that of
Umbesetzung, or reoccupation by modern answers of the theoretical space of
previous theological questions. See Hans Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the

12 By adding to a path that begins with Kant and goes on with Heidegger and
Derrida, we may well summarize this genealogy as onto-theo-physio-logy,
where the third morpheme in the agglutination hints to the Greek term φύσις,
physis or nature, as the representative of the third major centre of Western
thought.

literary strategies, which construct both their narrative space and their characters.

In particular, these two poetics of exclusion differ both in their targets as well as in the positioning of the excluding boundary. While, in the medieval inscription, the boundary cuts across the field of theologico-philosophical propositions, in the modern one, the boundary encloses the field of philosophers. In other terms, Tempier does not even mention any authors, targeting instead a list of theses, which he expels from orthodoxy. By contrast, the modern drafters attempt to expel Derrida from philosophy in order to neutralize his thought.

We may also notice that such de-philosophizing of Derrida is current practice at least in analytically-oriented philosophy departments. Moreover, we may detect a disturbing similarity between the pre-emptive practice of stripping authors of their legitimacy to speak and the modern pre-emptive dehumanizing pattern that opens the gates of concentration camps (we might even play on this pattern of exclusion by stripping someone of some quality, and we might suggest that maybe the call of a no-longer-justice pushed the no-longer-philosopher Derrida to give voice to no-longer-humans).

By targeting anonymous propositions, Tempier implicitly acknowledges their supposed propounders as thinkers, though he recasts their arguments into the straw man of double truth. Moreover, we may observe the caution of the bishop, who uses the word *quasi* as a limitation to his rhetorical masterpiece. The Latin word *quasi* can be rendered in English as “in a similar way to,” “as if,” or “nearly,” so that Tempier states only the closeness of the condemned propositions to the statement of double truth. We may say that the bishop nearly takes responsibility for exposing the theoretical monster that is hidden within the texts of the Aristotelians.

The modern drafters too search Derrida’s texts for hidden meanings. In their letter, they declare this search unsuccessful, as it reveals assertions that “are either false or trivial.” Unlike the medieval reader, however, the modern ones do not take responsibility for their interpretation of Derrida’s texts as a theoretical void. They put the burden of proof entirely on Derrida, who is not acknowledged as a philosopher, but as someone who “describes himself as a philosopher.”

From a modern perspective, the role and the identity of philosophers are the major stakes in the 1277 censure, which thus acts as a veritable projective test in the hands of its various interpreters. Following Mandonnet, Le Goff constructs the intellectual targets of Tempier’s censorship as free thinkers and libertines who do not
hesitate to recur to sophistry in order to escape prosecution.14 Hissette is instead deeply perplexed by the lack of correspondence between Tempier’s accusations and the available texts of the (supposed) culprits, whom he eventually describes as victims of the “lack of objectivity and discernment” on the part of the censors.15 On the contrary, Bianchi underlines the will of the Parisian *magistri artium* to free philosophical enquiry from religious control16, whose reaction through the 1277 condemnation also triggered the long-term effect of intellectual self-censorship.17

A radically different interpretation of Tempier’s intervention is proposed by Duhem18, who underlines its productive effect on the history of Western thought. In particular, Duhem contends that the rejection of the theses 34 and 49 of Tempier’s list also implies the refusal of the concepts of infinity and place as defined in Aristotle’s *Physics*, thus paving the way towards modern science. While it is difficult to fully endorse Duhem’s construction of Tempier as a performer of the cunning of (later) reason, the latter’s “inadvertent inventiveness” is also underlined by de Libera.19 In particular, de Libera makes Tempier invent “the philosophical project of thirteenth century,”20 which takes shape in his decree as a photographic negative image of the philosophical ideal of the *magistri*.21

This reversal clearly applies to the censor’s projection of libertine sexual beliefs on a (supposed) defendant such as Siger of Brabant,

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20 Ibid., 202.
who instead claims in writing the *status virginalis* as the more appropriate lifestyle for philosophical speculation.\textsuperscript{22} And yet, the censored statement number 40, "that there is no more excellent condition, than the exercise of philosophy,"\textsuperscript{23} perfectly pictures instead the proud *magister artium*, who invents the post-classical philosopher precisely by clothing himself as an aristocratic classical thinker. It is ironic that in this sentence, the image of the censored produced by the censor perfectly matches the image that the censored depicts of himself, so to speak, as another one.\textsuperscript{24}

The role and the identity of philosophers are also at stake in the 1992 censure, which, as previously recalled, appears to differ from the previous one mostly for being an attack *ad hominem*, albeit one that is ultimately unsuccessful. And yet, the same Derrida constructs the "Cambridge affair" as a symptom of a wider picture.\textsuperscript{25} He first sardonically asks if his censors would be so worried if his work had really no influence on other philosophers. Derrida then retorts: "Each sentence of the letter violates the very principles in whose name these academics pretend to speak (‘reason, truth, and scholarship’)."\textsuperscript{26}

Moreover, he adds that the attack would not be possible without the connivance of journalism, and he quotes an article on the popular German magazine *Der Spiegel*. But also in this case, Derrida underlines the responsibility of crusading intellectuals: "it is not a journalist, nor even an English journalist, it is an academic, Sarah Richmond, who first says of my ‘ideas’ that they are ‘poison for young people,’ which *then* becomes *Der Spiegel’s* title (*Gift für den Geist* [poison for the mind, R.B.], no. 16, 1992)."\textsuperscript{27}

Of course, it is also possible to accept the supposed plain of discourse of Derrida’s censors, and even to show that at least one of


\textsuperscript{23} "*Quod non est excellentior status, quam uacare philosophiae,*" my translation. David Piché, *La Condamnation Parisienne de 1277* (Paris: Vrin, 1999), 92.

\textsuperscript{24} Inspired by Hegel, Marx understands the role of clothing oneself in a past fashion as part of the effort to transcend the present. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, he lists several revolutionary ruptures that were acted in the clothes of a past otherness. Rimbaud first consciously claims for himself this construction: "*Je est un autre* [I is another]" he affirms in his famous letters to his teacher and mentor Georges Izambard (13 May 1871) and to his friend Paul Demeny (15 May 1871).


\textsuperscript{26} *Ibid.*, 404–405.

\textsuperscript{27} *Ibid.*, 405.
them, the logician Quine, could be understood as unwillingly sharing in some of Derrida’s deconstructive practices.28 Perhaps it would be more interesting to consider the aggressive attitude of the American Philosophical Association (to which Quine and another censor, Marcus, belonged) as the meaningless repetition of the immunizing procedures that shielded the members from McCarthy’s attentions.29 However, we may take further Derrida’s suggestion, and we may read his “excommunication” as a symptom, or better, a quasi-symptom30 of an undeclared clash between two alternative ways of enacting the role of the intellectual. In this perspective, the medieval and the modern acts of censorship acquire an uncanny similarity.

Tempier targeted any proposition that seemed to bypass the canonists’ construction of the Christian god as the source of legitimation of the new ecclesiastical intellectual aristocracy. Hence, the Latin Averroists were censored because they embodied a kind of self-conscious intellectual aristocracy that did not coincide with the Church as a collective and universal intellectual.

In a similar way, Derrida’s supposed (and even imagined, as the “logical phallusies”31 of the letter to The Times) statements played for his censors the role of a dangerous alternative to their perceived function as scholars.32 And yet, their clamorous protest was also a sensational performance of the happening of deconstruction, because by claiming the absolute incompatibility of their scholarship with Derrida’s they also exposed their own incompatibility with the

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30 I would more prudently propose a quasi-symptomatic hermeneutic approach, which would take account of our role as interpreters who make texts show or hide some content. In other words, I would recall our responsibility also in the construction of the new problematic of which the textual material becomes a symptom as a result of our chosen hermeneutic strategy.
31 Derrida himself replies to his supposed quotation: “I challenge anyone to find in my writings the expression ‘logical phallusies,’ by which the signatories of this document, in what is a serious and dogmatic abuse of their authority in the press, try to discredit me” (Derrida, Points, 404).
32 In the language of Deleuze and Guattari, the writers of the letter acted as a repressing agent upon Derrida by constructing “their” displaced represented Derrida as a target. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Œdipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, (tr.) R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004).
alleged openness of modern discourses. We might consider their censoring intervention as an act of closure, and we might compare it with Tempier’s closure under the wider rubric of exclusion.

We could describe both the medieval and the modern exclusions as practices of othering, or, in Derridean terms, of construction of the other. In particular, we could make a distinction between a poetics of relative othering, with which the medieval cleric implicitly constructs the other as a thinker who may err (and eventually recant), and a poetics of absolute othering, with which the modern academics explicitly construct the other as a non-philosopher, who is simply not allowed to join the philosophical arena. We may be tempted to take these two poetics as instances of a more general historical attitude. In this case, we may venture to define the modern ferocious absolute othering as the specifically modern ability to systematize practices of dehumanization.

Dehumanization is a powerfully evocative word. Though it could suggest the supposition of both the quality of being human and its disposability, I am here using it just to describe processes of constitution of specific subjects, such as the inmates of modern total institutions. These inmates undergo processes of absolute othering, in which they are stripped of their reason, conscience and will. In a historical perspective, we may notice that the birth of total institutions is contemporary with the declarations of reason, conscience and will as universal human qualities. However, I am not suggesting a causal link between these two series of occurrences, nor assuming that the former (the declarations) are the condition of possibility of the latter (the total institutions). I would rather argue that the formatting of inmates as inmates is the ongoing result of the iteration of practices of exclusion. For example, iterating the practices that in late 18th-century France turned the detention centres for the idle poor into mental asylums produced the iterable concept of mental illness.

Derrida defines iterability in the language of presence as “the condition of the constitution of identities, of ideality, and, to go quickly, let’s say of any concept in general.”\(^{33}\) At the same time, Derrida warns: “But (double bind), it is also what perturbs any analysis because it perturbs, by resisting, the binary and hierarchized oppositions that authorize any principle of distinction in the common discourse as well as in philosophical and theoretical discourse. This is why,” Derrida underlines, “I called this iterability a

quasi-concept or an inconceivable concept." In Kantian terms, Derrida remarks that while iterability is the condition of possibility of the iteration of identities and concepts, it is also the condition of impossibility of identities and concepts’ iteration without alterations. In a nutshell, “iterability alters.”

It is not difficult to trace a genealogical link between the Derridean notion of iterability and the capacity to reawaken primary retentions in Husserl. Here, I would question the quasi-concept of iterability, inasmuch as it still relates to a Kantian and Husserlian theoretical horizon. This questioning will require reversing the relation between iterability and the practices of iteration. Moreover, I would argue that iterations—and not the acontextual function of iterability—allowed both the (open) constitution of Western identities and their (covered) ongoing disruption.

I would also suggest that the detection of the movement of diffé-
rance can generate a true Copernican revolution only inasmuch as we let difféance set iterability, as it were, in motion around practices of iteration. More precisely, this would produce a true anti-Copernican revolution, because iterations would lose their centre, namely their supposed origin, which would become another trace. In this way, the movement of difféance would challenge the priority not only of the original over its iterations, but also of identities over relations, or conditions over actions. Hence, it would reverse the more general process of decontextualization that produced conceptual discourse by turning actions into functions.

The shift from actions to functions is described by Havelock as already occurring in the period between Homer and Plato, and it is still witnessed by the English words that describe the ability to perform actions. For example, the term “possible” (on whose model the word iterable is construed) iterates, through the French intermediary possible, the Latin word possibilis. The Latin word possibilis (possible) turns the verb posse (can) into an adjective with the

34 Ibid., 31.
36 The poisonous and remedial effects of pharmaka, which grounded the dynamic openness of the tragic age of Greece, became irreducibly aporetic only after the selective intervention of Plato’s pharmacy. However, Plato’s clear-cut chemistry was the culmination of a long alchemical work on Greek language that began with Hesiod. See Eric Havelock, Preface to Plato (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963). For a contemporary recasting of the pharmacological approach, see Bernard Stiegler, What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology, (tr.) D. Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
addition of the suffix -ibilis. The same procedure of turning verbs into adjectives by suffixation is at work in classical Greek. Here the verbal adjectives constructed with the suffixes -tos, -tē, -ton can express both the meaning of the past participle and the sense of possibility.37 This double use is a clear trace of the double transition, first from an action (doing something) to its acquisition as a concluded experience (something done), and second to its detemporalization as a possibility (something doable). We may legitimately suspect that long before iterability, iterations38 altered. Only the claim of being (or presence) reduced the practices of iteration to their allegedly constitutive condition of iterability.

Iterability justified the reproduction (without alteration) of theoretical objects within the regime of being. And yet, in doing so it also dangerously hinted to the production of these objects. As Western metaphysics relied on the erasure of the human production of metaphysics’ theoretical objects (be they forms and being in classical ontology, god in theology and nature in modern thought), for Western philosophers the iterability of theoretical products was somewhat disturbing. In particular, human theoretical products often appeared to philosophers as rising against humans in the shape of spectral autonomous powers. We may cite, as classical examples of these spectres, writing in Plato’s warnings39 and young Hegel’s objectified human activity as the alienation of human nature.

Max Stirner first claimed that these various spectres were not different from the Holy Ghost and its two coeternal persons.40 According to Stirner, any conceptual construction (from god to man) acquired a spectral nature when its production was erased. Marx

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37 For example, the word gnōstos means both known and knowable. Overall, we may say that my diachronic sketch is the genealogical complement to Bergson’s purely theoretical reversal of the relation between reality and possibility. Bergson conceived of possibility as a retroactive projection of real events onto the past: “le possible est l’effet combiné de la réalité une fois apparue et d’un dispositif qui la rejette en arrière [the possible is the combined effect of a reality once it has appeared, and of an apparatus that projects it backward]. Henri Bergson, “Le Possible et le Réel,” in La Pensée et le Mouvant (Paris: PUF, 1975), 112.

38 Derrida, Limited inc., 18: “Rather than oppose citation or iteration to the non-iteration of an event, one has to construct a differential typology of forms of iteration.” However, I would prefer emphasizing the differential character of iterations through a genealogical approach, rather than a typological one.


recognized with Stirner that the spectral character of ideas was the effect of their severance from their processes of production. Nevertheless, by explaining this severance in economic terms, Marx attempted to subdue the evoked spectres to another spectre, that is the unfolding of productive forces. Hence, he iterated the modern gesture that boasted neutralizing spectrality through its naturalization.\footnote{This naturalization is the specific modern recasting of theological entities, which are translated in the language of the last avatar of metaphysics, namely nature. Though Marx historicized human production, he did not reject the natural category of production in general: “Production in general is an abstraction, but a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common element and thus saves us repetition.” Karl Marx, Grundrisse, (tr.) M. Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 85.}

Philosophers from Plato on stigmatized spectralized products because of their threatening autonomy, which was precisely the essential feature of those products that must not be recognized as products, namely the various metaphysical centres such as ideas, being, god and nature. For example, Plato imputed to writing the usurpation of the proper autonomy of ideas. Though he never ultimately decided whether sensible copies reproduced ideas by \textit{mimēsis}, \textit{i.e.} imitation, or \textit{methexis}, \textit{i.e.} participation, the autonomy of ideas granted their reference status. According to Plato, this was a proper autonomy, as he claimed that ideas were \textit{not} a human product, but rather the model for human products. As a \textit{technē} or human product, writing could instead dangerously reproduce speech without keeping the link with the speaker. Writing’s autonomy was then just the provisional autonomy of a copy severed from its original. We may notice that this phonocentric view of writing survived the classical ontological framework, and it inspired Saussure’s construction of language.

Derrida rightly contextualized\footnote{I would consider genealogy as a diachronic context.} Saussure’s phonocentrism and its spectralization of writing within the genealogy of presence.\footnote{Jacques Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, (tr.) G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).} We may likewise contextualize the concept of iterability within the process of spectralization of human products. As previously recalled, under the regime of presence, the alterations, which inevitably resulted from practices of iteration, were expelled from the proper field of presence as the effects of dangerous supplements. In turn, iterations were construed in the language of being as implementa-
tions of the supposed condition of possibility that preceded and produced them, namely iterability.

In the 17th-century comedy *Le malade imaginaire*, or the imaginary invalid, written by Molière, a successful candidate physician explains the effect of opium with its *virtus dormitiva*, which is a macaronic Latin way of naming a sleep-inducing principle. Though Molière only meant to mock physicians, his *virtus dormitiva* also exposed the more general Western intellectual habit of constructing abstract principles as groundings and explanations. I contend that when we ground iterations on iterability, we are not only producing a kind of *virtus iterativa*, or iteration-allowing principle, but we are also following the mainstream path of Western thought in projecting a retroactive principle upon a series of supposedly consequential occurrences. Aristotle brilliantly rendered this teleological construction with his conception of potential, which he derived from biological processes of ontogenesis. 44 According to Aristotle, just like an acorn has to become an oak tree, any reality subject to change has a potential to be actualized. Molière’s *virtus dormitiva* iterated the Aristotelian construction of potentiality as an attempt to predetermine actualizations.

While 17th-century natural philosophers reduced the complex Aristotelian causal scheme to just one physical cause, they maintained its absolute external objectivity. The Kantian condition of possibility then shifted this external causal path towards an inner spatio-temporal receptacle for possible phenomena. Though Kant presented his critical turn as a limitation to the pretensions of reason, he reacted to the much more radical attack to naturalistic ontology waged by Hume. Kant particularly resented the Humean challenges both to the universality of non-mathematical knowledge and to the identity of the individual subject. As the atheist Hume dismissed the theological roots of modern rationalism, the Lutheran and Pietist Kant devised a strategic retreat for Christian and modern universalism, with the theoretical tools provided by the Antitrinitarian theologian Isaac Newton. 45

In the late 17th century, Newton devised a model of absolute space and time, which were the abstract containers of the whole

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reality and the immediate expressions of the Christian god. A century later, Kant made the human subject, so to speak, internalize Newtonian space and time as abstract containers of all possible experience. In this way, transcendental subjectivity granted immediate universality as a necessary structuring condition. Moreover, as Hume’s theoretical tempest also threatened individual identity, Kantian transcendental subjectivity salvaged this very identity by reconstituting it at the level of the human species. If we expand the marine metaphor, we may say that Kant conceived of his transcendental island as a safe haven for metaphysics from the rugged oceans of Humean scepticism. In this way, Kant not only provided modern scientific practitioners with a more flexible ideology than crude naturalism, but he also shifted the guarantee for the universality of knowledge from a dubious external objectivity to a more defendable transcendental subjectivity.

The Derridean double bind that produces at once conditions of possibility and impossibility does make sense only in relation to this Kantian horizon. Moreover, though the concept of double bind relies on the Aristotelian principle of contradiction, it was formulated as a psychotherapeutic theoretical tool. I would briefly examine this concept in its original field of constitution in order to better assess both advantages and limits of its use.

Gregory Bateson devised the notion of double bind as a hermeneutic tool for understanding the behaviour of so-called schizophrenics. The supposed meaningfulness of the acts of patients opened for them the possibility to engage with Batesonian observers and family members in communication practices, to which they

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47 “In man (as the only rational creature on earth) those natural capacities which are directed toward the use of his reason are such that they could be fully developed only in the species, but not in the individual.” Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, (ed.) H. Reiss, (tr.) H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 42.


49 Here I group under the definition of Batesonians all the psychiatrists who deployed the concept of double bind as a hermeneutic tool in their therapeutic practice.

50 The notion of communication was (unfortunately) appropriated by information theory. I use it here in the Derridean (and Spinozist) spirit of conceptual
could participate again as human subjects. When psychiatrists such as Ronald Laing, David Cooper and Aaron Esterson actively engaged with their so-called psychotic patients in communication practices, double binds could be not only logically, but also practically untied.

I contend that it is not the meaningfulness of the patients’ past behaviour, but the patients’ practical re-legitimation as social actors that can unblock the behavioural dynamics of both patients and their micro-context. Of course, these “deviant” dynamics imply a violation of the injunction of consistency. Nevertheless, inconsistency is labelled as “deviant” only inasmuch as it is socially unsuccessful. It is the unacceptability of patients’ behaviour that turns them into psychiatric problems, while the unintelligibility of their behaviour is just a rationalization of their exclusion, which positions them outside of the boundary of normality.

In particular, this rationalization of exclusion constructs the excluded ones by measuring their distance from the ideal modern subject, who is absolutely intelligible and self-consistent. The Batesonian observer, by focussing on the intelligibility of the behaviour of patients, engages with these patients’ context at the level of the rationalization of excluding practices. At this level, the concept of double bind renders the behaviour of so-called schizophrenics meaningful again, and it thus undermines the psychiatric rationale for the social exclusion of diagnosed psychotics, namely their incomprehensibility.

Nevertheless, while the focus on double binds underscores consistency as a necessary condition for engaging in social interaction, it does not consider that the very necessity of consistency is both affirmed and denied in modern social pragmatics. While self-consistency is explicitly required from the modern subject, she also needs to learn to act in a multiplicity of social roles as if this injunction did not exist. In other words, while self-consistency is the condition for the subject to be recognized as a subject, she is at the same time requested, as it were, to modulate her identity according to various degrees of inconsistency, in order to engage in actual social relations. In other words, the global request for consistency can only be applied locally.

51 This word recurs in Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which was a major theoretical source for Cooper and Laing. See in particular Ronald Laing and David Cooper, *Reason and Violence* (London: Methuen, 1964).
We may regard psychiatrically sanctioned dissociation as a desperate attempt to face the multiplicity of social injunctions with a socially untenable response, namely a multiplication of self-consistent selves. Hence, the schizophrenic split could be understood as an extreme gesture to save absolute consistency by distributing it as a local consistency of multiple subjects. However, this gesture does not answer a merely logical request, because schizogenic injunctions are often blatantly contradictory expressions of authority figures, so that their disorienting power is experienced as a terrifying power of exclusion. Though in general only the weakest link of the schizogenic family chain is turned into a clinical scapegoat, she embodies the inevitable failure to conform to conflicting injunctions, including that one of consistency. In doing so, she also exposes injunctions as articulations of a pragmatics of impending exclusion.

The double bind hypothesis constructs schizophrenic behaviour as the result of a desperate attempt to conform to injunctions, in order to escape the possibility of exclusion. This possibility is particularly dramatic if the subject under threat of exclusion from a relational space cannot conceive of an outer/other space for herself. In this case, she experiences the threatened exclusion as a possible annihilation. We may understand such an absolute danger as mirroring the absolute power of injunctions, which in turn express the absolute closure of relational systems. In particular, Laing and Esterson underlined the closure of schizogenic families, whose members appear to experience the “external” world as a constant menace to the precarious safety of the family space.\(^{52}\) Injunctions (regardless of their consistency) perform also as shibboleths, which appear to reconfirm the possibility of being accepted within these family spaces. The very failure of the weakest link to pass such identity tests paradoxically confirms the solidity of the family chain.

We may venture to construct along the previous lines the more general role of injunctions in practices of exclusion. In particular, we may observe that under the regime of presence, injunctions that set the boundaries for accepted contents and behaviours are brought into play as shibboleths too. These shibboleths perform a double role, as they confirm both the power of the testers and the powerlessness of the tested ones. For example, both Tempier’s declarations and the anti-Derridean letter to The Times construct their drafters as subjects who have the power to issue injunctions. More important,

this is a vicarious power, as it is derived from the presence of god and nature (or reason) respectively.

Within the closure of presence, the only possible self-empowering move has always been the countering of injunctions with other injunctions, either as a claim to better represent the same validating authority (viz. Calvin and Luther’s direct appeal to god), or as the appeal to another authority, thus opening a clash of presence’s avatars (as nature versus god, in Feuerbach’s appeal to human nature). On the other hand, still in modern times, the exposure of the general functioning of all the avatars of presence has been a recipe for complete intellectual isolation, as in the case of Stirner (if not for madness, as with Nietzsche). Heidegger recovered both Stirner and Nietzsche’s intimations, which he nonetheless reconfigured within his project of destruction of Western metaphysics. In this way, he ended up iterating the palingenetic claim of modernities, which strove to provide a sort of “clean slate,” or a completely new beginning for Western thought. As Derrida was aware of the deep ambiguity of novelty, he put forth instead a startling proposition (albeit still in the form of injunction): “we must begin wherever we are.”

Derrida derived the injunction to begin wherever we are from the absence of absolute starting points. He used a well-established spatial metaphor that describes the theoretical enterprise as a kind of movement. Nevertheless, Derrida gave this metaphor a substantial twist, by attributing a literal meaning to the starting point of the theoretical process. Since classical antiquity, this starting point was never intended as the actual inception of the theoretical path, but rather as its grounding. Such grounding was variously conceptualized as an origin, a principle, a telos or, in Hegelian terms, a progression that is a retreat to the ground. Derrida defined it as a centre, or in Heideggerian terms as an immediate presence, which played the role of the unmoving mainstay of the whole conceptual structure. Derrida also provided a more detailed list of the groundings or fundamentals of Western thought, including eidos, archê, telos, energeia, ousia, alêtheia, transcendentiality, consciousness, God and man. All these fundamentals performed the function of being the centre of their theoretical structure. The acknowledgment of this common function allowed Derrida to encompass the whole of West-

53 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 162.
ern thought as a chain of substitutions of one centre by another centre. At the same time, this acknowledgment created the possibility of the seeming oxymoron of a noncentred structure.

Derrida credited Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger for opening the way to the recognition of the function of centres in Western thought. In particular, he praised Nietzsche for thinking both the structurality of structures and the possibility of a noncentred theoretical space. On the one hand, Derrida underlined the tension between play and presence, as the tension between the playful Nietzschean approach and the traditional Western centre-centrism (which also resurfaced as the Western mourning for the loss of centres). On the other hand, he also detected the ongoing reconciliation between these approaches, which participated in a yet obscure economy. Derrida refused to choose between what seemed to be the only alternatives because he claimed he could already catch a glimpse of their common ground and of the *différance* of their apparently irreconcilable difference. However, in 1966, he could envisage such an emerging region only as a formless or even monstrous option.56

Derrida was not only peering at a theoretical region where the question of *différance* could be asked. I would argue that, by posing such a question, he made a substantial contribution to the construction of this emerging region. However, Derrida was acutely aware of the difficulties involved in the production of a noncentred structure. In particular, he recognized that Western theoretical language had yet neither a lexicon, nor a syntax that could avoid the reconstruction of another centre. Moreover, Derrida distanced himself from the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics. With his deconstructive approach, he rather assumed the risk of engaging with Western texts without the guarantee of a metalanguage. In Derrida’s words, this daring gesture took the shape of a denial: “there is no outside-text.”57 I would stress that, despite a popular misinterpretation of this famous statement, Derrida never intended to reduce reality to language. On the contrary, while he was deeply concerned with the

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56 In his 1966 paper, “Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida writes of a region of historicity (*une region de l’historicité*) in order to define the contemporary condition, but he also hints to the formless novelty as the species of the non-species (*l’espèce de la non-espèce*), which we could easily make into the space of the non-space (*l’espace de le non-espacement*). However, this region would be better imagined as a topological space rather than a Euclidean/Newtonian one, as it implies a shift of focus from identities to relations. See Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 278–94.
57 The original French sentence is “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158).
“other” of language\textsuperscript{58}, he excluded the very possibility of a non-perspectival or absolute gaze, of which written language always appeared as the mere expression. A main instance of this non-perspectival gaze was the immediately universal presence of the Christian god.

Since the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, the performance of the non-perspectival gaze of the eye of god was the model for the non-perspectival gazes of scientific observations. Such supposedly objective observations in turn were reported in written narratives, which were presented as describing a likewise objective nature. Modern scientific discourse was construed by these narratives as a structure, or, better, as a network of structured languages, whose mainstay was the unmoving presence of nature. While scientific naturalism did not completely substitute religious narratives even in the West, it increasingly played a reference role for all Western discourses.

During the last fifty years, modern Western views were challenged from a variety of perspectives. Because these perspectives were not necessarily reducible to a common theoretical ground, they also construed their counterpart in different ways. Hence, despite the reductionist confrontation between modernity and postmodernity, we are more realistically to face a plurality of modernities. Latour even suggested that such a plurality allowed the West to prevent the resistance of non-Westerners to the colonial and neo-colonial invasion by taking a multiplicity of different and even contradictory positions.\textsuperscript{59} For example, the multiplicity of totalizing systems represented by Western soldiers, merchants and missionaries often left no possible alternatives to Western domination. However, the modern horizon came to be progressively structured according to the categories provided by scientific discourse.

Scientific thought and its object, namely nature, reoccupied the central place that structured Western thought first as an ontological speculation on ideas and being, and then as a theological speculation

\textsuperscript{58} Jacques Derrida and Richard Kearney, “Deconstruction and the Other” in Richard Kearney, \textit{Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers} (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 154: “It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the other of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite.” See also John Caputo, \textit{The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 16.

on god. Hence, in modern times scientific representations ended up setting the standard for representations in general. As examples of the current hegemonic role of the sciences, we may consider their influence on the previous hegemonic theoretical frameworks of Western thought, namely philosophy and religion. The very structure of scientific argument permeated both philosophical and religious discourses, as shown by the growing importance of science-inflected analytic philosophy\textsuperscript{60}, and by the demonstrative apparatus of contemporary religious narratives.\textsuperscript{61} Despite the resilience and even the recovery of religions, nature as construed by Western sciences is more than ever the theoretical core of Western thought.

However, while nature is just another avatar of presence, its theoretical hegemony allows injunctions that are more impersonal and ferocious than in the past. Dehumanizing campaigns could have neither be conceived of in the classical closed world, nor from within the divine order of things. In the former case, human universalism was unthinkable, and thus exclusion was necessarily localized: for example, both in Greece and Rome exile was a sort of civil death. In medieval Christianity, human universalism was derived from god, and it was not renounceable as it granted the punishability of each individual. Though enemies and heretics could be targeted in their bodies, they could never be stripped of their souls.

These comparisons are not out of nostalgia for any past whatsoever. I am rather following Nietzsche (and, after him, Foucault), who devised genealogical tools not so much to express a longing for a bygone era, as to construct other perspectives in the present. Here I attempted to show how in the regime of being injunctions rely on the immediacy of presence, so that we could question injunctions themselves by deconstructing texts and practices that erase mediations and their costs. By attempting to show that metalanguages, outside-texts and all other centres can be maintained only at a cost, I also meant to show that the injunctions they imply are conditional on the acceptance of such costs: and it is within the theoretical region that is emerging since fifty years, that we can at last ask whether to accept or not to accept to pay these costs.

While this emerging theoretical region is still akin to a recently open construction site, it is already crowded, because it is the place where we all are and from where Derrida wanted us to begin. Moreover, this region bears family resemblances to the rhizome-like

\textsuperscript{60} It is not by chance that the public anathema on Derrida was signed by scientists and analytic philosophers.

\textsuperscript{61} See, for example, the so-called intelligent design hypothesis.
condition of being always in the middle, as devised by Deleuze and Guattari. It also appears as the vindication of the field of nonmodern worlds, or, in Latour’s words, the Middle Kingdom that stands in between the poles of nature and culture, and it hosts the hybrids that Serres calls quasi-humans and quasi-objects to remind us that they constitute each other. Overall, this region allows a sêmeiôsis, or signification that is truly unlimited, because it is neither contained within the realm of words nor that one of things.

I previously stated that I was comparing the medieval inscription by Tempier and the modern letter to The Times from a contemporary perspective. I can now specify that I was not evoking a new zeitgeist, but I was rather positioning myself within the theoretical region envisaged by Derrida more than forty years ago. From this region we are no longer bound to consider practices only inasmuch as these practices signify, but we can also focus on that which these practices produce. In particular, we can conceive of practices of exclusion as processes of production of excluding and excluded subjects, and we can decide to assess the costs of this production.

By questioning presence we break the spell of modernities, as we realize that modernities' promises cannot be fulfilled. In turn, we are also no longer bound by modernities’ injunctions. Hence, we are no longer forced to construct theories as injunctions that must be backed by an enforcing authority, be it evidence, logic or numbers. On the contrary, we can think of theoretical products as proposals, which do not necessarily substitute each other as in the paranoid zero sum game of metaphysics. We may then reformulate Derrida’s injunction as an invitation to begin wherever we are. Rather than defining our contemporaneity as a claustrophobic battlefield for old and new centres, we can conceive of it as a time when we can both formulate and accept this invitation.

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