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God as War. Derrida on Divine Violence

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PEETERS

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GOD AS WAR.
DERRIDA ON DIVINE VIOLENCE

RICO SNELLER

1. Introduction

Could there ever have existed a philosopher who, without having the intention of spreading vulgar atheism or putting forth blasphemous critique of God, had the audacity to associate God with Difference, Desert, Violence and War, or even with Pubic Hair or Excrements? The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) had this audacity. Being at odds with a Judaism that had been carved into his flesh by circumcision, struggling with the burden of the great Book, called Torah, and battling against strangling phylacteries (*tefilin*), seduced by the great Husserl and Heidegger and wholly taken with French tradition — from Descartes to Mallarmé —, he unburdened himself recently by confiding to his French audience that he had decided *not to decide* on whether to have himself, like his father, be buried wrapped up in the *tallieth* (prayer shawl) he had once been given by his grandfather. “I have decided that the decision would not be mine, I have decided not to dictate anything regarding my death. Thus, I render myself to the truth of my decision: a verdict is always the other’s.”¹

Jacques Derrida, modern or post-modern French philosopher: has he ever been otherwise engaged than with the question of *God*? And what would it mean were this true? Would it mean that he was a crypto-theologian, and that he contributed in his own proper way to the perpetual theological or philosophical debate on God, on the question who or what God might be? Or would it mean that he was engaged — just like Jacob, wrestling with the Nameless one on the banks of the Jabbok² — in a combat with someone for whom even the *name* ‘God’ would risk to name him *prematurely*? And if these things were all true, what would this mean for philosophy? Is philosophy able to guard itself against

¹ H. Cixous et J. Derrida, *Voiles*. Paris, Galilée, 1998, p.47 [H. Cixous and J. Derrida, *Veils*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001].

² Genesis 32: 22-32.

'God', against that which is named by the very name 'God', or against that which is designated by this name? And will it indeed be possible, as a philosopher, "not to get mixed up in theology" as Descartes would have it? Will it in fact be possible as a theologian to stubbornly remain entangled in *ontotheology* — that presents God as a supreme being and brings him within the reach of our thinking. Shouldn't philosophy help to free oneself from ontotheological illusions as, for instance, Levinas would have it?

In this article, I will insist on the ways, in which Derrida introduces God in French philosophy, or otherwise, evacuates him out of it. I will address the question as to the way in which Derrida provides a space for an *alterity* that interrupts thinking, and cannot be adequately grasped by thinking — that is: grasped by means of a concept, an idea or a mental picture —, but without which thinking cannot expand either.

First, I will elaborate the way in which Derrida — mainly in the wake of Heidegger — opposes ontotheology, that is: opposes an image of God that pictures him as a highest being, a being that would be accessible to thinking *before* it would have *done* something to thinking or to the thinker himself.

Second, I will dwell upon the peculiar fact that Derrida *readopts* the word or the name 'God', yet conferring heterologous shades of meaning to it. I will principally confine myself to his associations of God and 'violence' or 'war', and I will show that the word 'difference' (*différence, différance*) is the common denominator these *uncommon* names can be reduced to. I will also try to make a reasonable case for the fact that the identification of God and violence exactly raises the question of *theodicy*.

2. Language and Difference

Why would it, in fact, be impossible to not only address but also answer *unambiguously* the question as to Derrida's philosophical convictions with respect to God? Would this not be because the question's very articulation, as a matter of fact, is always presupposing something? The question presupposes a certain concept of God. As a rule, this presupposition entails the concept of an infinite and almighty Being, that leads an independent and separate existence. Derrida denies repeatedly the existence of such a Being. In this, he essentially continues the Heideggerian critique of ontotheology and the Nietzschean verdict about God's death.

In this section, I will try to draw up Derrida's objections to ontotheological representations of God, that is: of God conceived as a Supreme Being. A critical stance towards these ontotheological representations already characterizes Derrida's earliest texts, and it continues to do so up to and including his latest writings. The metaphors he uses to expound his resistance against God-as-a-Supreme-Being are mainly taken from writing practices or from theories on the relationship between the spoken and the written word. Note for example the following important terms in Derrida: scripture or writing (*écriture*), meaning, sense (*sens*), sign (*signe*), signifier (*signifiant*), and signified or significance (*signifié*).

2.1 'God', Logos and Logocentrism

Western thought, Derrida argues, continuously appears to be wholly oriented by one and the same philosophical paradigm, viz. the *spirituality* of truth, and its accessibility to human *spirit*. We usually call this Western, philosophical-theological paradigm the *commensurability of thinking and being*: both being and thinking can (and are to) be measured by the same measure, they can (and are to) be compared to each other on account of their similar structure. It was Parmenides who first drew up this paradigm: "Thinking and being are the same." In this respect Derrida speaks of the 'epoch of the logos'.

Within this (*logo-centric*) paradigm, Derrida affirms — and he seems to be original in this³ — the *spoken* word has always taken precedence over the *written* word. This seems to be evidence itself, for does not he who tries to express his own thoughts, while speaking, appear to be most near to these very thoughts? He who speaks can at any time re-state his words more precisely or in more detail and, when mistaken by his audience, resume (re-assume) and confer new verbal expressions to their mental predecessors. Once the words have been written down, however, the bonds between them and their original, underlying thoughts become very loose, not to say wholly interrupted. The written word — Derrida repeatedly shows, referring to innumerable examples taken from the history of philosophy and theology — is only a faint shadow of the preceding, living word. It can give rise to misunderstandings, its author being

³ One would then have to neglect specific medieval cabbalistic currents, for example the one around Isaac the Blind (12th Century) taking *written* Torah to be pre-existent and to be even prior to creation (which had been made up of Hebrew letters); one might even refer to the earlier *Sefer Jetsira* ("The Book of the Creation"). See a.o. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, Schocken Books, 1995 (1941).

unable to adequately and immediately intervene. The spoken word being already a mediation — that is, of pure, immediate thought —, how much more this applies to the written word! The *spoken* 'signs' or 'signifiers' are fleeting and, once expressed, instantly evaporate. *Written* signs or signifiers are durable, steady and, in fact, hampering: they block or obfuscate the appropriate access to (spiritual) truth. This access consists of an act of (spiritual) apprehending, and not only of an act of simply reading letters.

The following passage, which I borrow from one of Derrida's earliest writings, makes clear how Derrida associates the concept of 'God' to the aforementioned paradigm and to the 'epoch of the logos' or 'the history of metaphysics'. 'God' turns out to be the very accomplishment of this history:

"The epoch of the logos thus debases writing considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning [*sens*]. To this epoch belongs the difference between signified and signifier [...]. The difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality. [...]

The signified [...] refers to an absolute logos to which it is immediately united. This absolute logos was an infinite creative subjectivity in medieval theology: the intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God [*la face de Dieu*]."⁴

So, 'God' guarantees the intelligibility or the comprehensibility of sense or meaning. Without 'God', the grasping of such meaning is impossible. Suppose I am thinking about, say, the past, about someone else's sayings, about a particular moral problem. What I will be doing then, is comprehending 'meanings'. These meanings — for example, that what *really* happened in the past, the *factual content* of my interlocutor's remarks, the *concepts* of 'right' and 'wrong' as well as the *concrete human behavior* I am referring to by means of these concepts — are what they are *in or for God*. Their sense or meaning is included in God. If there were no God, nothing would be stable: either in the past or at present, let alone in the future. Without God, it would be impossible both for me and for my interlocutor to ever determine a proper meaning, to ever determine what I myself or my interlocutor really means by

⁴ J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*. Paris, Minuit, 1967, pp. 24, 25 [J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp. 12, 13].

saying something. Moreover, it would be altogether impossible to reach any definitive agreement upon what should be ultimately considered as evil and what as good. Do not all these things (concepts, events, matters of fact, meanings etc.) coincide with what they are or have been *in God's eyes*? Is not God He who knows what is or has been 'really' going on? Is it not He who prevents confusion or irreducible perspectivity to have the last word, and who guarantees truthfulness to truth and realness to reality? Is not the conviction that all sense or meaning is located *in God* the final point of reference for all my thinking? Is it not exactly *this* I am referring to when speaking? And also: is it not exactly *this* I am referring to — but *indirectly*, this time — when writing? My spoken — and *a fortiori*, if necessary, written — verbal signs always refer to this ultimate sense, Derrida holds. "The sign and divinity", he continues, "have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never *end*. Its historical *closure* is, however, outlined."⁵

Two remarks are required here. First: to be true, Derrida speaks here about 'medieval theology', but that does not prevent the trust in the logocentric paradigm referred to, from having much wider implications. Derrida not only mentions Plato and Aristotle, but also Descartes, Rousseau, Jaspers, and even Heidegger, and modern semiology and linguistics. Nietzsche, however, seems to be excepted. For Nietzsche, Derrida suggests, has made a decisive contribution to liberate writing from its domination by logos, truth, meaning, and finally, of course, by the Meaning par excellence: 'God'. Nietzsche, according to Derrida, has been led much more by the effects of (the letter of) his texts than by their (cognitive, thetic) content. What mattered to him was much more the *production* of meaning, the proliferation of new, alternative meanings, than the scrupulous conservation of one single predominant meaning. Derrida seems to have in mind approximately the same thing, especially (?) when he *reconsiders* the *name* 'God' after having abandoned any ontotheological *concept* of God.

Secondly, I would like to indicate here that Derrida does not in the least expect theology or logocentrism — 'theo-logocentrism' — to be definitively refuted or concluded. He is prepared to admit that we cannot do without its conceptuality. The point Derrida wants to make is that this ontotheological conceptuality necessarily presupposes something it cannot prove. This presupposition, he argues, consists of the assumption of

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25 [*Ibid.*, p. 14].

a final instance that assures all comprehensibility, of the premise of a unifying quality that gives rise to sense or meaning as such. That is logocentrism. Without such an Assurance, and without its accessibility assured by the Assurance itself, Derrida affirms, we are bound to writing. That is, we are bound to something that is said to obfuscate things, something that is supposed to be dead in itself without the clarifying assistance of the original author; something, to put it briefly, that without such an Assurance is suddenly *not less* precise, exact or adequate anymore than the spoken word is. Indeed, without such an Assurance it would be very tempting to conceive of the spoken word as just a *kind* of writing or scripture. For, are not audible signs (spoken words or letters), just as visible signs (written words or letters), only discernable in that they differ from others? And is not the spoken word equally susceptible to misunderstanding, as the speaker is not wholly able to master his audience's frame of reference or its hermeneutic horizon? And finally, is it not striking that many a philosopher, from Plato on, when trying to explain the process of thinking and the role memory plays in this process, so often appeal to metaphors of writing (for example, when they talk about the 'wax tablet' or the 'slate' of memory our daily experiences are 'stored' onto)? What do these scriptural metaphors tell us in fact about the alleged purity and originality of a thinking that is supposed to have or generate pure thoughts? Does not the appeal to a metaphoricity of writing with regard to thinking reveal that I will only be able to reflect if my thinking is originally impure, that is: if it does not wholly coincide with itself, nor ever exactly know *what* it really thinks? (One should recall here Freudian psychoanalysis, which suggested that human conscience is not capable of grasping itself entirely, and which is determined by unconscious desires.)

2.2 *Deferral, Difference, Trace*

In order to point out the 'fundamental' character of writing, Derrida proposes to use the word 'trace' instead of 'sign'. Why does he do so? Whereas the concept of the 'sign' implies the designation of a significance, the notion of 'trace', by contrast, — at least as used by Freud, Nietzsche or Levinas — does more justice to the jumble of references, to the inapproachability of true, fixed meanings, and finally: to the permanent deferral (*différance*), brought about by deferring differences, of their definitive Embeddedness or Pivot, usually referred to as 'God'. On the contrary, the sign, or rather: the *trace* — though subjected in the

Western logocentric paradigm to the so called 'thing in itself' — is 'pivotal'; the trace is pivotal in continually deferring *the* Pivot. All this is pointed out in the following quotation. The passage at the same time shows, however, a remarkable shift: a shift *from* a critique of 'God'-as-Pivot *towards* a heterologous, more affirmative use of the name of 'God'.

"The subordination of the trace to the full presence summed up in the logos, the humbling of writing beneath a speech dreaming its plenitude, such are the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without difference: another name for death, historical metonymy where God's name holds death in check. That is why, if this movement begins its era in the form of Platonism, it ends in infinitist metaphysics. Only infinite being can reduce the difference in presence. In that sense, the name of God, at least as it is pronounced within classical rationalism, is the name of indifference itself. Only a positive infinity can lift the trace, «sublimate» it [...]. [...] [T]he logos as the sublimation of the trace is *theological*. Infinitist theologies are always logocentrism, whether they are creationisms or not."⁶

This quotation is conspicuous. For, as we already noticed, not only does Derrida repeat here that Western thought is prejudice-ridden (*i.e.* it is prejudiced in maintaining at once the *spirituality* of truth, its *accessibility* to human thinking in virtue of their mutual commensurability, and the *assurance* of truth's spirituality and accessibility by an infinite being: 'God'), but he puts forward two definitions of 'God', that is: definitions of what 'the name of God' is able to express. The first definition seems to be advocated by himself: God as deferral of difference (*différance*, from *différer*: 1) 'defer', 2) 'differ'), and, in the same breath, as 'death'. The second definition seems to be bound to the theological metaphysics of infinity questioned by Derrida: God as 'indifference'. We will see in a moment that both definitions are closely related to another, or at least that the latter definition is self-contradictory and finally comes down to the first one.

When taking a closer look at the immediate context of the quoted passage, one finds out unexpectedly that Derrida suddenly starts speaking about 'the name of God' as more or less synonymous with *différance*: deferral-or-difference, and so, with 'death' (finitude). But it is equally striking that he does not limit himself (as for example Nietzsche does) to just questioning the 'infinite being', which assures signs (traces) —

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104 [*Ibid.*, p. 71].

which operate in virtue of their mutual differences — to join their meanings, and which — once taken away — leaves these signs to uncontrollable dissemination, unremittingly seeking after their infinitely *post-poned* meanings. Derrida draws a conclusion from the implications of the 'infinite being'. This infiniteness, being capable of reducing all differences (signs, traces) to the identity of a meaning, a signified or a thing-itself, is itself without any difference. It is *non-* or *in-*difference in itself. Would this not be the case, it would not be able to do what it does, that is: assure and found meaning.

Both definitions apparently contradict each other: God as Difference and God as Non-Difference, as Indifference. This should not surprise, for the first definition is suggested by Derrida himself, whereas the second one is implied by the same Western logocentric tradition — or at least by 'the classical rationalisms' — he has repeatedly *put into question*. Nevertheless, this contradiction is only apparent. I shall try to show, as I have already done by quoting the above passage, that Derrida treats his own critique of ontotheological concepts of God — God as a supreme being — as more or less conclusive, and that this conclusion gives way to a *subsequent* affirmative *re-adoption* of the word or the name 'God'. In this re-adoption, the notion of 'difference' plays an essential role. Even indifference, supposed to be part and parcel of traditional (rationalistic) God concepts, appears to be capable of being *reduced* to it; which would imply these traditional concepts to be self-contradictory.

3. God and Violence

The way Derrida readopts the name of 'God' *affirmatively* is highly fascinating. Mysterious definitions which take the form of 'God is X' arise throughout his work like a bolt from the blue. I will mention some of them in what follows. What all these definitions have in common is that they only shed light on one or another *aspect* and thus cannot be reduced to each other. The very pretension to write an article on Derrida's conception of (the name of) 'God' would already be contrary to this 'conception' itself: 'God' cannot be conceived of, and that which is referred to by the name 'God' cannot be reduced to some univocal concept. The definitions Derrida uses always contain an element of surprise. So in this article I will mainly 'treat' one of those aspects: the Derridean association of God with *war* or with *violence*. If some common denominator of

all the different aspects *had* to be indicated, the (purely *formal*) notion of 'difference' might seem imperative. We have already, a moment ago, encountered this notion. In the final section of this article, I will try to interpret Derrida's affirmative use of the name 'God', with reference to the notion of 'correlation'.

In one of his earliest texts — the famous essay on Levinas from 1964, entitled *Violence and metaphysics (Violence et métaphysique)*⁷ — Derrida explicitly equates God to 'difference'. He does so in a commentary on Levinas' philosophy of the otherness of the Other.

It is noteworthy that Levinas' philosophy, too, elaborates a notion of difference, a difference (in Levinas' own words) between the Other and the Same. The Other, according to Levinas, never wholly coincides with his appearance or with my perception; the 'difference' between the Other and his manifestation is irreducible. To be sure: the *word* 'difference' does not play such a big role in Levinas, and contrary to Derrida, Levinas seems less interested in (phenomenological) difficulties implying that things can only appear in a frame of reference or in a given context (Derrida: in difference). Nevertheless, Derrida appreciates Levinas' main urge to keep the Other outside the reach of our thinking: for Levinas, the Other keeps different from my thoughts or my conceptions. What Derrida effectively criticizes is the fact that Levinas at least seems to hedge his bets: (1) the bet of the Other as infinite alterity, as absolute difference, and (2) the bet of the Other as some instance accessible to thinking anyhow, that is, as some *kind* of presence. To explain the first bet (1), Derrida uses the metaphor of 'death': infinite alterity implies radical difference (with respect to anything thinkable, imaginable and presentable), implies *death*. The second one (2) is designated as 'positivity and presence'. Levinas, so Derrida argues, leaves his bets regarding the otherness of the Other ultimately undecided, these bets being mutually exclusive. Infinite otherness and positive infinity are incompatible.

"Infinite alterity as death cannot be reconciled with infinite alterity as positivity and presence (God). Metaphysical transcendence cannot be at once transcendence toward the other as Death and transcendence towards the other as God."⁸

⁷ J. Derrida, *Violence et métaphysique. Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas*. In: Idem, *l'Écriture et la différence*. Paris, Du Seuil, 1967 [J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978]. Besides, what about the title of the entire volume, with respect to the definition of God: 'writing and difference'?

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170 [*Ibid.*, p. 115].

Next, Derrida prepares his tentative nomination of God as Difference, as the other name of the difference *between* the infinite Other *and* that from which this Other differs (thinking, perception, world, etc.).

"Unless God means Death, which after all has never been *excluded* by the entirety of the classical philosophy within which we understand God both as Life and as the Truth of Infinity, of positive Presence. But what does this *exclusion* mean if not the exclusion of every particular *determination*? And that God is *nothing* (determined), is not life, because he is *everything*? and therefore is at once All and Nothing, Life and Death. Which means that God is or appears, *is named*, within the difference between All and Nothing, Life and Death. Within difference, and at bottom as Difference itself. This difference is what is called *History*. God is *inscribed* in it."⁹

Whereas Levinas seems to adopt an indecisive attitude with regard to the infinite Other as radical alterity, on the one hand, and as positivity, form or presence (God as a person), on the other, Derrida cuts this knot for him. It may very well be, he says, that the name of 'God' is not capable of referring to a radical alterity (as this alterity would then again get within the reach of our comprehensive reflection or imagination). It may very well be that it is incapable of reaching beyond the border line of difference (of difference *as* border line) towards a person, figure or form that would be *both* thoroughly other *and* infinite. It is nonetheless capable of naming the border or difference itself, Derrida adds. 'God' would then be the name of the border, of difference, or even — using Derrida's own metaphor — of death. To be true, Derrida continues, this was already implied by our philosophical tradition. When this tradition called God 'Life', 'Truth', or 'Infinity', it did so in order to liberate him from all possible sorts of determinations and to indicate that God infinitely transcended those determinations. This means that as soon as such an utterly transcendent, entirely other God is not susceptible anymore to any specific determination whatsoever, calling him either *nothing* (i.e. total indeterminateness), or *anything* (i.e. comprehension of *all* determinations), would amount to the same. There would be no difference between calling him either Life (*full* Presence), or Death (*perfect* absence). Do not such designations remove themselves and phase themselves out into the pure indifference just mentioned?¹⁰

⁹ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰ For 'God' as Death, see J. Derrida, *Aporias. Mourir. S'attendre «aux limites de la vérité»*. Paris, Galilée, 1996, p. 49 [J. Derrida, *Aporias*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 22].

It is not very difficult to grasp here Derrida's line of reasoning. For it figures both in Nicolas Cusanus, who called God the *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of oppositions), and in Hegel, who as no other in the history of Western philosophy located difference within God himself. God himself, Hegel argued, does not coincide with himself from the outset, but consists precisely in a differing from himself. God or the Absolute is the unity of unity and opposition. Theologically speaking: it belongs to God to reveal himself in and as that which he is not and with which he does not coincide. But as Cusanus and Hegel finally reduce difference to ultimate unity (to an indifference that annihilates and sublates all differences), Derrida, on the contrary, maintains that we do not overcome difference. Let us return to the passage just quoted. For, what exactly does that mean: 'God' as Difference? We need to note here the distinction between the *name* 'God' and its *reference*: the X the name is supposed to refer to. This reference — conceived of in Western philosophical tradition, as it has been accomplished by Hegel, as an infinite being finally *devoid* of any determination or difference — is dissolved into itself by Derrida, as though it consisted of an inner contradiction. For infinite alterity excludes all positivity or determinability. What is left is only the name: 'God'. This name takes an *intermediary* position between the act of naming and the Named. It stops short at the border between language and its evoked beyond. As opposed to Thomas Aquinas, Derrida does not see how a perfect *res significata* (reference; 'signified object', i.e. God) could be denoted by the imperfect referentiality of our speech acts (*modus significandi*: 'mode of signifying/referring'). Such a divine *res significata* is encapsulated in the *significatio*, that is: in the referring speech act itself. Language is incapable of escaping from itself. Precisely this is what the equivalent notion of 'death' — the Derridean metaphorical expression of difference — is saying, namely: the very incapacity of language to attain definitely its denoted meanings or signified objects, the very impotence of language to extend to a supposed non-linguistic 'reality' that would be its significant foundation.

But at the very same time language is not wholly enclosed in itself, either. Were this true, then language or speech acts would not be possible at all. Our verbal signs (words) would not be able to set themselves free within our human communication, nor would they be fit to refer to anything else. An infinity of words or signs would then be indispensable to show the infiniteness of differences in 'reality' (one may recall here the complexity of Chinese scripture that, as compared to Western

alphabets, needs a huge amount of characters to be ever 'complete'). A sign would not be a sign anymore, reference no reference, and language no language anymore. Language — 'reality' *as* language or *as* a frame of reference — refers to something outside itself, which it is at the same time unable to refer to directly, but which is evoked obliquely in the very *act* of referring. According to Derrida, the difference between language and its 'outside', the intermediary position between signs and that which these signs refer to, is 'God', that which is expressed by the name 'God'.

So God-as-Difference intends to express two things. First, it means — *ex negativo* — that this name ('God') can never immediately refer to some person or instance that would be both wholly-other and infinite. 'God' is not and cannot be the name of some supreme being, or of something that would in some way or another be susceptible of being thought or imagined as something infinitely transcending our reality. Second, it means — *ex positivo* — that 'God' is a relational 'concept'. Being an alternative name for difference, it refers to the poles of those elements that are effectively correlated, and only detach themselves of their interplay (their mutual differences) *after* first having been absorbed within it. So 'God' means: relation, interplay, interaction-between-inside-and-outside, or even *correlation*.¹¹ The name 'God' expresses the *entanglement* of, on the one hand, 'truth' or 'world' (as it manifests itself to) 'thinking' and 'perception' and, on the other hand, of a radical alterity that cannot be thought apart from all this. The entanglement renders it impossible to clearly and distinctly dissociate these two *poles* and two treat them separately. On the contrary: it is primordial. Only *parting from* entanglement or difference polar, differential categories such as 'thinking' and 'alterity', or 'perception' and 'outside', not to say 'earth' and 'heaven', or even 'man' and 'God', loom up. The last two pairs of concepts are perhaps rather traditional or theological; *as* a pair at least, they do not dispose of an evident philosophical 'residence permit'. Still, *as* a pair, they attest the same dynamics as the others.

¹¹ One would do well here to call to mind the thesis of the famous Dutch 20th Century theologian K.H. Miskotte, according to which the 'essence of the Jewish religion' could be restated in terms of a doctrine of correlation: the (*cor*)relation between God and man is prior to their separate and independent existence. K.H. Miskotte, *Het wezen der joodsche religie. Bijdrage tot de kennis van het joodsche geestesleven in onze tijd*. Amsterdam, H.J. Paris, 1933. NB: the literal notion of *Korrelation* is to be found in Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), in his *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1919). Wiesbaden, Fourier Verlag, 1978 (1966) [H. Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*. New York, F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1972 (Scholars Press 1995)].

3.1 War and Violence

The other associations of the name 'God' given by Derrida — Desert, Violence, Pubic Hair, Excrements — all fit in the scheme I have just tried to frame in a rather abstract way. In the following section I will delineate this with respect to closely interconnected notions such as 'war' and 'violence'.

Throughout Derrida's work we come across the vital, almost metaphysical or transcendental sense of 'violence' or 'war'. "War, therefore", as Derrida puts it in his essay on Levinas, "is congenital to phenomenality, it is the very emergence of speech [*parole*] and appearing."¹² And somewhat further: "Violence appears with articulation."¹³ Should language, expression, phenomenon, appearing, perception etc., be possible at all, then *violence* is presupposed. Anything can only appear or reveal itself in a context or in a framework in which the phenomenon, the verbal expression etc., is *illuminated* — and this in a variety of ways, depending on the coincidental context or the fortuitous frame of reference. To give an example: I will only be 'myself' in the accidental context or framework I find myself in; only there, I will have 'significance': as a husband, as a father, as a university teacher, as a friend, as an acquaintance or a colleague, etc. But, as these contexts never entirely overlap, and as these contexts also alter or shift when taken separately, I can never really say that I am 'myself'. My real 'I' always seems to have been postponed. My 'true identity' always seems to have been violated, precisely by the very contextuality that first enables any 'I' or 'identity' to appear as such. My 'I' or my 'identity' is therefore only *an* I or *an* identity, never my real or definitive one. The violence encountering such a definitive identity or such a final *I* perpetually postpones them. But at the same time, this violence permits the *I* — *an* I — to appear on the scene: the 'violent' scene of a family, a lecture-hall, a meeting of relatives or a visiting of friends. There is no place I can really be said to be 'myself'; nevertheless, all those scenes offer opportunities to be *an* I or to be *a* self: irreducibly *opened up* to an ultimate I, coinciding with itself, an I that will not have been affected by any violence, but remains inescapably irretrievable.

Why in fact use such an extreme metaphor such as 'violence', whereas only the rather 'innocent' question of the possibility for

¹² J. Derrida, *l'Écriture et la différence*, p. 190 [J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 129].

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 219 [*Ibid.*, pp. 149f.].

phenomena to appear (respectively for thoughts and ideas to be conceived of) is at stake? Why overload phenomenology — and philosophy as such — with so heavy a term? And, in connection with this: what exactly has this violence to do with God? I shall try to gradually develop these questions further; yet, for now, I will draw attention to the particular perspective in which Derrida puts phenomenology and philosophy as such, by using words like 'violence' and 'war' — and by even referring to them with the name 'God'. I am pointing here to the perspective of a *theodicy*, that is: to the question of a possible *justification* of suffering (with respect to a good God who would admit it).

It is not wholly without reason that Derrida puts (phenomenological) philosophy in the perspective of a theodicy. He is urged in this by the question that Levinas had already asked about phenomenology: the question whether — and if so: how? — an alterity can appear without immediately being neutralized by a reflective or even an objectifying consciousness. In his text on Levinas (*Violence and Metaphysics*) Derrida confronts us with the fact that the pure expression of the face of the other, which finds itself in the trace of God, can only appear impurely. To put it more concretely: God can only reveal himself in a non-divine (i.e. human, phenomenal, phenomenological) way, which means: contaminated or affected by context, framework, background or perspectivism. It is evident that Derrida would forcefully reject Jean-Luc Marion's suggestion, some fifteen years later, according to which God "plays [in Jesus Christ] a human role *in a divine manner*", without getting in touch with the ordinary being of things, people and phenomena as such.¹⁴

It is striking how Derrida not only applies to God what in any case also went for phenomena (viz. that they are subjected to the violence of contextuality, which prevents anything from ever being itself, nor to be either conceived or perceived purely). Derrida not only states that even God — in order to be able to appear or to present ('reveal') himself — is subjected to contamination by context, frame or referentiality, so as being unable to present himself pure or undamaged. (This idea further elaborates on Derrida's critique of ontotheology: the ontotheological representation of God gets entangled within referential webs to such an

¹⁴ Cf. J.-L. Marion, *L'Idole et la distance. Cinq études*. Paris, Grasset, 1977, p. 219 [J.-L. Marion, *The Idol and Distance*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2001, p. 172]. Cf. also J.-L. Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*. Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1991 (1982) [J.-L. Marion, *God without Being*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991].

extent that, to our thinking, God is unable to escape from them unambiguously or objectively). Derrida not only subjugates God to violence, he even goes as far as *identifying* him with it and *applying* the name 'God' precisely *to* violence. In doing so, he puts phenomenology and philosophy into the perspective of a theodicy. For, the name 'God', of course, is not — any more than the word 'violence' — an arbitrary word, suitable for noncommittal application to anything at all. It quite definitely calls up associations that were also entailed by a more traditional use of the name. Derrida, as no other, seems to be very well aware of this.¹⁵ Now, when he, *on the one hand*, explains the opportunity for phenomena to appear at all — and *a fortiori*, for concepts to be conceived of — in terms of *violence*, and, *on the other hand*, takes 'God' to be a *name* for such violence, he then re-locates philosophy, phenomenology, epistemology etc., within the sphere of most people's deeper (more proper?) questions: daily questions regarding the meaning of existence, the reason for suffering, and God's presence or absence in all this.

To be sure, Derrida does not give clear answers to these clearly stated and well-known questions. But he opens a perspective that sheds a light on those questions and that might be appropriate to disclose *possible* answers, be they only initial or inaugural.

There is one outstanding place in which Derrida associates the name 'God' with violence and war; I am alluding to a reading of a passage of James Joyce's bulky and almost impenetrable *Finnegans Wake*. This reading can be found in *Two Words for Joyce (Ulysse gramophone. Deux mots pour Joyce)* (1987). In Joyce's labyrinthine swan song, Derrida comes across something like a needle in a haystack. In the midst of the never-ending and unreadable word craft of the great Irish author, we suddenly find these two words: *he war*. Is this English? German? Or both at the same time? Who is this *he*? What does or did he do? *Was* he (German, cf. *er war*), was he warring, belligerently? Or all this simultaneously?

¹⁵ As appears from his ascribing to Heidegger the use of the word *Kampf* ('struggle') in times thoroughly impregnated by the words *Mein Kampf*: cf. J. Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié*. Paris, Galilée, 1994, p. 392. Or from his fastening to Jan Patočka, Czech philosopher knowledgeable about Heidegger and his work, the very designation of God by means of the words 'supreme being': cf. J. Derrida, *Donner la mort*. Paris, Galilée, 1999, p. 52f. [J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995].

As a second James Joyce¹⁶, Derrida, with unflagging zeal, explores all semantic nuances of the formula *he war*. *He* is applied to God: God who, on the one hand, *is*, as he-who-is or as I-am-who-I-am (cf. Exodus, 3: 14) and who, on the other hand, wages war, 'wars' or, who *comes down* to war. Indeed, the passage's immediate context, in which the words *he war* figure, contain many Old Testament references; among them the story of the Tower of Babel, the construction of which was interrupted by God who delivered man to an irretrievable, 'Babel-like' confusion of tongues (Genesis, 11). I will quote here a fragment in which Derrida tries to translate, or to render, the words *he war* as scrupulously as possible:

"I spell them out: HE WAR, and sketch a first translation: HE WARS — he wages war, he declares or makes war, he is war, which can also be pronounced by babelizing a bit (it is in a particularly Babelian scene of the book that these words rise up), by Germanizing, then, in Anglo-Saxon, he war: he was — he who was ('I am he who is or am', says YAHWEH). Where it was, he was, declaring war, and it is *true*. Pushing things a bit, taking the time to draw on the vowel and to lend an ear, it will have been true, *wahr*, that's what can be kept [*garder*] or looked at [*regarder*] in truth. God keeps himself to declare war."¹⁷

We have to read this passage in its vivacity and its playfulness. Derrida tries to read *he war* in such a way that all possible shades of meaning resonate *simultaneously*: he 'warred', 'he was', 'he (was) true/truth', 'he was *by warring* (belligerently)', 'it is *true* that he was there by warring', 'he *kept* himself to (wage) war', 'it is true that he kept himself to...', etc. In the quotation immediately following, Derrida insists on the *he*: who is this really? At the same time, he connects Babel with a 'Babel-like confusion of tongues' (something which, in the immediate context, is also done by Joyce, however).

"He, is 'He', the 'him', the one who says I in the masculine, 'He', war declared, he who was war declared, declaring war, by declaring war, was he who was, and he who was true, the truth, he who by declaring war verified the truth that he was, he verified himself, he verified the truth of his truth by war declared, by the act of declaring, and declaring is an act of war, he declared war in language and on language and by language, which gave languages, that's the truth of Babel when YAHWEH pronounced its

¹⁶ Derrida alludes to the similarity of their names, *James, Jacques*.

¹⁷ J. Derrida, *Ulysse gramophone. Deux mots pour Joyce*. Paris, Galilée, 1987, p. 16f. [J. Derrida, Two Words for Joyce. In: D. Attridge and D. Ferrer (eds.), *Post-Structuralist Joyce. Essays from the French*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 145 (trans. completed, RS). NB: the English translation is incomplete].

vocable, difficult to say if it was a name, a proper name or a common name that confuses."¹⁸

This complex but nonetheless playful and vivid Derridean meditation asks for a close reading and re-reading, if it is to be truly understood. Again, it is a scrupulous meditation on all polyglot semantic nuances of the formula *he war*. At the same time, Derrida tries to show the inner connections of all those semantic nuances and to let them resonate simultaneously. He-who-is is the truth, but this truth only *comes* true, is only 'verified', *in* and *throughout* this war. Truth is *in the war*, it is *at war*, in other words: it is not yet purely present nor is it unambiguously isolated *from* this war. Thus, war is irreducible and it makes us lose all our hold. Truth is *yet to come* true, it is *yet to be verified*; *as yet*, it is absorbed in the turmoil (of contextuality, phenomenality etc., but also *literally*: of physical violence, physical war, physical suffering!). Now, the Babel-like confusion of tongues caused by God himself, according to Genesis 11, has consequences for God himself. By declaring war upon (the one, uniform and univocal, transparent arch-)language he has also declared war upon *himself*, he has also waged war against and combated *himself*. Why? Because *post-Babel* renders *pre-Babel* inaccessible. As soon as the confusion of tongues — and that also means the phenomenological 'violence' of contextuality, see above — is an accomplished fact, then we cannot without any problem reach beyond it, towards a prior, primordial state of transparency, purity and non-violent peacefulness. Even more: from our point of view, everything *starts* with this primordial 'violence', with this 'war' of Babel-like confusion. The only horizon that seems to announce itself is the ('eschatological') horizon of a *future*: a future that will have been delayed from the very outset, but that nonetheless will already have been evoked also from the very outset. Violence, war etc., can only present themselves *as violence, as war* etc., in the *light* of a peace or a non-violence that does not (yet) exist, that only exists in its being-delayed (its being-deferred), but that looms up at the horizon (dividing line) *of violence*. The coming true of truth must originate with this unapproachable, irreducibly outstanding future.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17 [*Ibid.*, pp. 145f. (trans. completed, RS)]

¹⁹ In *Violence and Metaphysics* Derrida affirmed that "eschatology is not possible, except *through violence*". J. Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence*, p. 191 [J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 130]. Previously, he had stated: "God, therefore, is implicated in war." *Ibid.*, p. 158 [*Ibid.*, p. 107]. Afterwards, in a text on Benjamin's critique of violence, Derrida puts it about the same way. By *pure violence* Derrida means here,

3.2 Theodicy?

There are other interesting passages in *Ulysse gramophone* testifying to this 'theological' or 'theodical' background of God-as-violence. In one of these passages, Derrida himself relates the untranslatable words *he war* to both the prohibition of images in the Ten Commandments (Exodus, 20: 1-3), and to the *fire* — that is, the *jealousy* of the (Jewish) God who does not tolerate idolatrous images (vs. 5) — and also, again, to God's self-introduction to Moses at the burning bush, saying 'I am who I am' (Exodus, 3: 14).

"So that's war declared: before being, that is being a present, it was: was *he, fuit*, the late god of fire [*feu le Dieu de feu le dieu jaloux*]. And the call to translate rejects you: thou shalt not translate me. Which will also perhaps be translated in the banning of translation (as 'representation', 'image', 'statue', 'imitation', so many inadequate translations of 'temunah') which immediately follows the moment at which YHWH names himself ('Me, YHWH, your Elohim...')."²⁰

In this quotation, Derrida treats the Exodus 20: 4 prohibition of images ("You shall not make for yourself a graven image") as a prohibition of translation; both these prohibitions root in a divine-violence-as-origin. The French word *feu* not only means 'fire', but also 'late' (i.e. 'deceased'). The second sense derives from the Latin perfect *fuit*: 'it' or 'he was' (from *esse*, 'being'). Again, Derrida tries to let several semantic nuances resonate *at the same time, relating* them subsequently, by means of the symbolic of the word 'fire' (= jealousy), to the prohibition of images and to its foundations: God, the unimaginable, *may* not be represented; his jealousy ('fire') does not bear any identifying shapes or translations.

as follows from the context, violence that takes place without any clear purpose or end; violence that takes place for its own sake; original violence, that is preceded by nothing that would explain it or that would give a good reason for it; a violence *prior* to any law or lawfulness that would be able to justify this violence. Cf. J. Derrida, *Force de loi. Le «fondement mystique de l'autorité»*. Paris, Galilée, 1994, p. 134 [J. Derrida, *Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority*. In: *Cardozo Law Review: Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. 11 (1990) 5-6, pp. 920-1045.

²⁰ J. Derrida, *Ulysse gramophone*, pp. 40f. [J. Derrida, *Two Words for Joyce*, pp. 154f. (trans. completed, RS)]. Cf. "And God spoke all these words, saying: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God." (Exodus, 20: 1-5).

Why is he not *susceptible* to being represented? Why is he unimaginable? Because he 'is' not, in the sense of being 'present', wholly coinciding with himself. By 'declaring war' — that is: by 'meddling in' the world, the phenomena, etc. — he has abandoned such a being-present. More to the point, if everything starts with this declaration of war, then there has never been something like a divine presence or secure identity. These have always been awaiting their fulfillment.

In the next passage, Derrida is still more specific: God cannot really be discerned from 'war':

"[The arch-event is war]. Not the God of war, but war in God, war for God, war *in the name of God*, just as one speaks about setting a forest *aflame*, war flaring up in the name of God. There is no war without the name of God and no God without war. That is, see above, without love. War can be translated with love, it is in the text."²¹

'God' and 'war', says Derrida, are not two different things: as if God were to be distinguished from war. God *is* war, *is* combat or violence, *is* relation or correlation with what he 'is' not (world, phenomena, thought, experience, perception, etc.). Just as God cannot be isolated as a separate identity that would first be present and *subsequently* would enter into 'combat', that *with which* he enters into 'combat' cannot be understood separately, as though it were something *previous* to the 'combat itself' (if one may still say so: the 'combat itself').

The fact that Derrida here even takes 'war' as 'love', shows (again) that words like 'war', 'violence', 'combat' etc., adopt both literal and metaphorical meanings. War equated with love, war of love: it might remind us of the expressions 'to conquer' or 'to capture someone's heart'. Lady Diana called herself a 'queen of hearts', because she wanted to 'win her way into people's hearts'. War-as-love, is this not again a discrete hint dropped by Derrida, situating talking about God as violence or as war within the perspective of a theodicy?

So, the core question of any theodicy is, whether suffering (here: 'war') is meaningful. Can it be justified by God in the end? Are there any good reasons for the suffering of humanity? Is there really a good God who has good, just or lawful reasons to bring us evil, or at least not to prevent it?

In the following lines, Derrida refers to this point; they are the last ones I quote from his Joyce commentary.

²¹ J. Derrida, *Ulysses gramophone*, p. 46 [J. Derrida, *Two Words for Joyce*, (my translation, RS)].

"He war, God's signature. In giving the law, and language, that is, languages, he has declared war. The establishment of the law, the institution of languages, *does not suppose any right* [...]."²²

We notice here that Derrida's speaking about God-as-violence evokes the question of theodicy without really answering it: the question can only be *illuminated*, but definitely cannot be answered conclusively. There is no right or law (*dike*, cf. theodicy) that was already there *prior* to the outburst of divine violence. This violence cannot be justified by any presumed pre-existent legal order.²³ Just as was the case with 'truth', a final justification — a theodicy — is *still* ahead, irretrievably. To risk a comparison here, one might think of Franz Rosenzweig's thesis that truth (*Wahrheit*) still has to verify (*bewähren*) itself; it still has to come true, it still has to prove itself. Truth is not true *yet*.²⁴ Here and elsewhere, Derrida is greatly concerned with *not* insinuating that some justification (a theodicy) already secretly exists somewhere and only has to be revealed. A possible justification is only to be expected from the *future*. It does not exist in some (hidden) presence and, so, cannot (yet?) be delivered.

It becomes clear that Derrida in these passages and others like it does not just elaborate some interesting or provocative metonymy. By relating God to violence and war, he turns philosophy, phenomenology, ontology etc. into something like a 'live wire', a 'wire' charged with the 'life' of the theodicy-question, the question about suffering, the eternal question 'why?', in brief: the question of Job. In a footnote, anyway, Derrida refers to the book of *Job*, by means of a secondary source.²⁵ Job stands for suffering man, man who has been struck by the violence of illness or plague, man who asks: why all this upon me? A definite answer to this question *is* (still?) not available. The question is waiting for an answer that is *yet* to be given.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 48 [*Ibid.*, (my translation and italics, RS)].

²³ Cf. J. Derrida, *Force de loi. Le «fondement mystique de l'autorité* [J. Derrida, Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'].

²⁴ F. Rosenzweig, *Stern der Erlösung*, III, esp. pp. 437ff. [F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*. South Bend, University of Notre Dame Press, 1990, p. 432]. Cf. also "God is the truth", truth itself being no *Allgemeinbegriff* (general concept), that would be capable of explaining God's essence in general terms.

²⁵ J. Derrida, *Ulysse gramophone*, p. 40f., note 1; not in English translation. In the book of *Job* it is God himself who inflicts violence or intrudes upon Job. Cf. Job 19: 6-7; 42: 7.8. Cf. also *Isaiah*, for example 42: 24-25; in 43: 10-11 God is even called 'enemy' ('*ojeev*'). This word is etymologically related to the Hebrew name 'Job': '*Ijjoov*'. 'Job' is a symbol for the one who has got meddled in a struggle or in a confrontation with divine violence.

4. Conclusion

Let us summarize in conclusion. By means of the name 'God', Derrida refers to an 'original dynamism'. To develop this original dynamism, he uses not only words such as 'trace', 'difference'/'deferral', 'writing'/'scripture', but also 'violence' or 'war', and finally even 'God'. The very name of 'God' is perhaps more than just an exchangeable, merely contingent one, precisely because of its *current* onto-theological use. Derridean definitions, which take the form 'God is X' (for example 'war', 'violence', 'difference', etc.), draw attention to an 'origin' or an 'all determining' process — be this a process that erases any idea of an 'origin', 'beginning' or 'principle'.

In repeatedly calling this process *God*, Derrida brings about interpretations that inadvertently fall back on (aspects of) the philosophical and religious tradition, regardless of how many efforts he makes to eliminate all 'onto-theological' remnants that pretend to make God accessible to thinking. I think that Derrida aims at *renewing* traditional God talk (within the philosophical-religious traditions) — and not, as for example Sartre did, at abandoning it as if it were something obsolete. The innovation in God talk Derrida realizes, applies this talk to a vivid *process*, to something that *strikes* me and *affects* me — instead of applying it to something that *is* or *exists*, as a neutral fact that would only *afterwards* gain significance or meaning. Derrida's application of the name 'God', his stimulating but frequently altering definitions seemingly try to prevent the process to grow set or to immobilize into something which I would be capable of observing or reflecting upon *without* getting involved 'myself'. Anselmian speaking about God as 'something above which nothing can be conceived of', or Thomist hierarchies according to which the question 'whether God is' comes prior to the question 'what he is': they are miles away from, for example, that which is said about God by expressions like God-as-violence. They come down to modes of speaking that try to determine 'states of affairs' apart from any correlative connection, *before* assessing their significance to us.

The specific content the notion of 'violence' added to the name of 'God' — in this article I have mainly insisted on this — confronts us, as we have showed, with the problem of *theodicy*: the question of suffering. This question is not solved by Derrida, it is touched upon, or better, *fanned* (as we fan a fire). Throughout 'violence' looms an eschatology, a future or a vista. But precisely because of the 'violence' at present ('violence' taken both phenomenologically and physically), eschatology,

according to Derrida, can never be treated as something assured. It is threatened by violence itself, that is: it is disputed, deemed impossible or improbable, suppressed, etc. But the 'essence' of violence itself, if we may say so, in the very act of suppressing evokes that which is suppressed, that is: the idea of an end of violence.

The Dutch language contains the adage 'to live as God in France', which means 'to live a life of Riley', 'to live in clover'. Well then, would God, according to Derrida, feel at ease in France? I do not think so. In conceiving of God as (original) violence, he dramatizes both God 'himself' — his 'essence' or his 'being' — and the use we make of this name, 'God'. This name names something different from that which we are used to naming with it.

Admittedly, in speaking about God-as-violence, Derrida does not seem to pay much attention to any 'retribution' to those who have really been ruined or molested by life's violence. In associating God with violence, he brings the theodicy-question to a head; the only consolation left might then reside in the possible (non-violent, eschatological) reserves the name 'God' still keeps back; these reserves would then be meddled in violence and would only be capable of self-realization *throughout* this violence. Derrida leaves this open, and does not develop this possibility at all.

So, to Derrida, God has given up his 'French' life in clover from the outset; he has never even lived it. Whether he will ever do so, remains an open question: "he who was he in declaring war. He resounds, he gives himself to be heard, he articulates himself and makes himself heard right up to the end."²⁶

²⁶ J. Derrida, *Ulysses gramophone*, p. 49 [J. Derrida, *Two Words for Joyce*, p. 157].