POLITICS FROM THE OUTSIDE IN:
TOWARD AN ANECONOMIC RECONCEPTION OF THE SUBJECT

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Abstract

Politics from the Outside In: Toward an Aneconomic Reconception of the Subject

Jonathan Cooper Weiss

This dissertation explores and endeavors to articulate a critical alternative to the constitution of *homo oeconomicus* as the principal locus of political life. The chief problematic engaged here is the manner in which the emphasis on private concern—on the economic self-interest of subjects—substantially forecloses the possibility of political or public engagement within a wider field that well exceeds the bounds of the self. The argument, then, is that in order to counter the depoliticizing dynamics of self-centering—in order, that is, to reignite the possibility of the political—the subject must be reconceived eccentrically *otherwise*, in the guise of an ethico-political subject that is given over, *pre-originally*, to that which exceeds its self.

Along this trajectory, the dissertation begins by tracing the development of economic subjectivity as the center of political life. It opens with a reading of Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the manner in which the private concerns of the *oikos*, or economics *proper*, extended outward from the household—taking ever-greater
hold of the public life of the *polis*. From its extension into and domination of the public, the dissertation then turns to the manner in which, under neoliberalism, this fully public or politicized economic form doubled back into the private realm of the household once more—coming to structure even the most intimate concerns of the private home in terms of economic arrangements.

Having arrived, with neoliberalism, at the apogee of economic subjectivity, the dissertation then turns toward the wholesale disruption of the economic. Here, in the name of tearing open the walls of the *oikos*, of the self-contained or proper, the dissertation engages a reading of works by Jacques Derrida—focused broadly on the deconstruction of self-containment, but, more particularly, on the aneconomic dynamics of the gift. Finally, having opened the foreclosed, the dissertation turns toward a subject for whom openness precedes even the possibility of closure—it turns, that is, toward the formulation of a subject constituted through its exposure; toward a subject organized around responsibility and not rights; toward the ethical subject of Emmanuel Levinas.
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There are a great number of people without whom this project would never have come to fruition. That said, I would like to briefly highlight the contributions of a few, starting with the members of my dissertation committee.

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I would also like to thank Angela Davis whose intellectual generosity has been an inspiration and very much models the sort of generosity toward which I aim at the end of this text. Without ever ceding rigor, Angela was always able to create a space in which seminar and reading group participants felt encouraged to engage—a positive space for productive and committed discourse.
Finally, I would like to thank Dean Mathiowetz, above all, for introducing me to Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*. I first met with Dean at a time when I was transitioning away from the first iteration of my project and was looking for a more solid means of grounding the work going forward. By introducing and discussing this seminal work of Arendt with me, Dean played a formative role in the project that followed—a role that should be readily apparent from the pages below.

Apart from my committee members proper, I would also like to thank David Hoy who, early in my graduate career, first introduced me to Levinas and Heidegger. The impact of this introduction upon my subsequent work cannot be overstated—the pages here being a paramount example.

In broadening the circle further, I would additionally like to thank both the organizers (Michael Naas and Paul Davies, respectively) and participants of the two sessions of the Collegium Phaenomenologicum that I attended in 2006 and 2008. The Collegium Phaenomenologicum provided me a genuinely collegial environment for exploring and expanding my interests in continental philosophy with a similarly devoted and deeply knowledgeable group of colleagues. In so doing, the Collegium introduced me to an intellectual community of which I had previously been unaware.

With respect to community, I would like to single out two fellow readers of continental philosophy with whom I participated in both larger and smaller reading groups: Mark Reid and Josh Hayes. Mark and Josh’s insightful readings and incisive
questions very much helped me to hone my own thoughts on various philosophical topics, several of which appear in the pages below.

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In memoriam, I would like to note the impact of a few people who have had a particularly marked effect on my intellectual life: Gary Lease, Yvette Aloïsi, Anil Ramayya and Jeff Wacks. Though in varying ways, each of these people has played a vital role in my understanding of what it is to be a committed and decent thinker.

And last, but of course not least, I would like to thank my family, starting with my parents who never lost faith in my ability to finish this project, despite my best efforts to cast the matter in considerable doubt. Above all, though, I would like to thank my partner of twelve years, Krista Lynes, without whom there is no question that this project would have withered on the vine. Krista has been a singularly invaluable interlocutor, supporting and challenging my thinking as the occasion demanded and, always, insisting upon the importance of the project as something which I must complete, despite my own paralysis or perplexity. Finally, then, in the name of a certain perplexity, I would like to thank our son, Xavier, who, as a toddler, has already taught me more about the ethics of humility and l’avenir than had many, many previous years of intellectual groping.
Introduction

The work that follows springs from the ever-tightening coils of an increasingly worldless world—the meanly instrumentalized world of neoliberal globalization. Far from worldly, much less universal, neoliberalism takes its stand squarely on the particular—indeed such is the basis of its increasingly universal appeal. Framed substantially in response to the totalitarianisms of twentieth-century Europe, neoliberal thought broadly eschews overarching forms of power. At its highest level, it contends that the centralization of power is the enemy of freedom. Indeed, according to a zero-sum calculus that has become increasingly popular (that has attained ever more marketshare): the greater the power concentrated in government, the less the power or freedom there remains for the governed. Further, the argument follows, the grasp of centralized power leads in only one direction—namely, toward its perpetual increase. Bound by the necessary partiality of its own perspectives, neoliberals argue that any governing power—even a

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1 Here we are playing with the subtle distinction between globalization and mondialisation made by Derrida. In preserving the French term, across translation, Derrida means to underscore the way in which the world is worlded or produced by those who inhabit and are, in turn, produced by it. This sort of mutual in-formation was taken up, by Derrida, from Heidegger and the Heideggarian concept of Being-in-the-world or Dasein. This concept was similarly taken up by Hannah Arendt, who is the other key figure of the reference here. Arendt argues that, absent the durability and objectivity of a shared and public world (a political world, or polis), there is no world at all, just the divided and concealed dimensions of the privative private home, or oikos. We will see these gestures broadly elucidated below.
putatively beneficent one—will always fail to fully accommodate the radically complex and pluralistic needs of those whom it aims to govern. Each particular failure, then, is doomed to the extension of power made necessary by the need to correct previous shortsightedness. The only way to protect freedom, then, is to inhibit centralization in the first place—to radically devolve power and decision-making to the level of the individual. As the bulwark against the excesses of centralization, then, the individual, above all, must be empowered and protected—rights must insured and shored up; principally the right of self-possession or freedom for self-determination. Along and in concert with the protection of the individual, though, there must likewise proceed the diminution of coercive authority on the individual. Steps, that is, must be taken to insure that the individual is left free to make his or her decisions for him- or herself. It is in the service of this latter aim that neoliberalism frames its centerpiece—the free market.

In order to protect the individual from top-down assertions of value, neoliberalism proffers the radically bottom-up approach stemming from the free market. Rather, that is, than allowing centralized powers to establish and impose standards of legitimacy and worthiness—to determine what is and is not worth doing—neoliberalism argues in favor of allowing individuals to assert value for themselves by freely and independently choosing amongst their available options. It

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In the more malign registers, where neoliberals believe such increases of power to inevitably lead, governments less concerned with pluralistic needs are framed, by historical precedent, to continue to extend their power both to increase their control as well as to stifle opposition or public dissent.
is in this way that the freedom of the individual forms not simply the end, but likewise the means for its own self-protection. Only free individuals, permitted to choose freely, the argument follows, can prevent the distortions of more centralized forms of power. Whereas centralized authority makes up its mind beforehand, imposing its decisions and dictating actions, within the market, it is the free and uncoerced action of individuals that is itself, at bottom, the very basis of determination. What comes to constitute value for the whole, then, is what bubbles up from the independent choices of disparate individuals. Rather than the particularity of a given perspective being imposed, it is thus the aggregate of the particularities arising from the vast array of perspectives that constitutes the market’s determinations. Rather, that is, than the deficit of a myopia that cannot account for pluralism, market value arises precisely from the plural itself. Rooted in and providing cover for freedom, market logic is thus naturally compelling; indeed, every bit as compelling as the state of nature, which it both plays into and evokes—therein, however, lie its dangers.

Given over to a profound skepticism for the top-down, market logic grounds itself firmly in the \textit{a posteriori} epistemological instrument of competition.\textsuperscript{3} Absent the top-down, only that which rises from the bottom up—through the bettering of its alternatives—is permitted to rise to the level of the highly valued. The pricing

\textsuperscript{3} For an excellent discussion of the epistemological dimensions of Hayek’s neoliberalism, see Lawrence J. Connin, “Hayek, Liberalism and Social Knowledge,” \textit{Canadian Journal of Political Science}, 23, no. 2 (June 1990): 297-315.
mechanism that serves to signal such successes thus resolves to the *gentleman’s edition* of the survival of the fittest. Only that, in other words, which defeats its competition can be lauded with evaluative success. The paradox, or indeed, ghostly genius at play here then, is that precisely the same mechanism that is intended to preserve the integrity of the individual, always, at the same time, imperils it. While on the one hand, that is, the freedom of the market is meant precisely to preserve the freedom of the individual, on the other, it serves to perpetually bring such freedom under threat—to limit its horizons or available opportunities if, that is, the individual in question does not govern him- or herself effectively according to the market’s competitive terms. Under the guise of value-neutrality then, the market imposes a very strict set of values indeed—values, moreover, given over to ever-mounting returns through pressures that increasingly ratchet down in only one direction.

While the far-flung freedom of individuals is never ostensibly zero-sum, bound in a marketplace where values move according the dictates of what others can afford or offer up, one remains locked unassailably into competition, even if only to preserve one’s position. Like Lewis Carroll’s Red Queen, one must run, simply to remain in place. Indeed the more one runs, the more one must run as one’s very running ramps up the competition for others who, in turn, must increase their pace to keep up or to get ahead. Getting ahead, moreover, invariably becomes part of the calculus of keeping up. If, the logic follows, one doesn’t press one’s advantage—
leverage a bend in the rules that leans one’s own proper way—then, more likely than not, someone else similarly positioned would indeed do so. Accordingly, one would find oneself proportionately disadvantaged—hence the need for constant motion and the ineffectivity of allowing oneself to ever stand still. Under the dual and dueling pressures of preserving one’s position (of shoring up one’s freedom by maximizing one’s ownmost possibilities) and competition, it is then precious little wonder that one’s thoughts turn toward the economic, toward the oikos—turn, that is, ever-inward toward one’s self and one’s own. Having one’s self placed at the center of one’s political identity—through the prioritization of rights and freedom—is self-centering enough. Compounding such self-centeredness with the pain of perpetual threat makes it ever less likely that one would ever have room to have done with one’s self. To be self-concerned in an environment in which all are encouraged to fend for themselves first and foremost, is no blot or rank distinction. On the contrary, it comes quite naturally; likewise, however, it is denaturing—strictly cultivated by the heavy hands of a form of governance that feigns to remain strictly hands off.⁴

⁴ We will take up the powerful compulsions of the laissez-faire in Chapter 2, within the discussion of Foucault’s analysis of neoliberal governmentality. For the moment, though, it is worth noting one of Foucault’s principle findings: namely, that the pressure to conduct oneself in a productive and profitable way increases in inverse proportion to the intervention of government in an individual’s life. In other words, it is precisely the withdrawal of government that compels one to govern oneself in increasingly controlled ways.
What, perhaps, is most remarkable about such governance is the natural ease of the mechanics of its reproduction. The inward turn of the economic constitutes the very winding of its springs. Cultivated individualism turns individuals away from each other and in toward themselves. Such turns, in turn, increasingly rarify spaces of solidarity, driving the need for increased self-reliance. The more one is compelled to fend for oneself, unallied, the more poignant and pointed the threat of competition. As we will see below, pain is one of the most privative and private of sensations—one that is least able to be shared or made public.\(^5\) Moreover, it tends to bind one to oneself—to narrow one’s horizons or capacity to take others into account. In the midst of suffering or struggle, that is, it is quite natural for one to be centered on one’s self—to be concerned with oneself first and foremost.\(^6\) Through the compound and compounding threats of competition, then, the free market tends toward the perpetual increase of self-interest. Individuals become seduced by competition precisely through the wounds that it inflicts. As we gestured toward above, the ostensible demands of defending one’s self often serve to justify offensive maneuvers (doing to others before they do to one’s self) that in the end only ratchet up the general intensity of competitive threat. Despite protestations to

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\(^5\) We will see more on the privative dimensions of pain in Chapter 1 surrounding Arendt’s discussion of labor and the private. The topic will also briefly reappear in Chapter 4 in the context of Levinas’s conception of sensibility.

\(^6\) With respect to the self-limiting dimensions of pain, this too will come up in our discussions of Arendt and Levinas, but has likewise been broadly covered in such texts as Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* and Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, among many others.
the contrary, then, it is hardly surprising that horizons of self-interest become progressively diminished and ever less enlightened.\footnote{Famously, in congressional testimony from October of 2008, Alan Greenspan spoke of his “shock” at the failure of self-interest on the part of lending institutions leading up to the economic collapse of that year. “As I wrote last March,” he explained, “those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholder’s equity (myself especially) are in a state of shocked disbelief. Such counterparty surveillance is a central pillar of our financial markets’ state of balance. If it fails, as occurred this year, market stability is undermined” (Alan Greenspan, Testimony to Committee of Government Oversight and Reform (October 23, 2008): http://clipsandcomment.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/greenspan-testimony-20081023.pdf). From our vantage, however, what (if anything) is shocking is the conception of self-interest as a relatively fixed or stable commodity. Immersed in the marketplace that it both serves and is served by, it seems far from surprising that horizons of self-interest would become diminished under the mounting pressures of competition. What, for instance, is in the self-interest of the trader who might lose his position or, at least, be cut out of a lucrative commissions or bonuses if he fails to capitalize on selling new, albeit potentially risky, financial instruments (e.g., the CDOs that brought the housing market to its knees)? Though the as yet unanswered question of “perverse incentives” on Wall Street has been asked, these seem to us hardly unique, but rather, of a piece with environmentally destructive manufacturing techniques; with the hyper-profitable pressing of carbon fuels without regard to environmental or geopolitical consequences; with the outsourcing of jobs that—even bracketing the horrors of human rights abuses—tend toward the decimation of the consumer base for the products being produced; etc.; etc.} Of course such broad strokes only trace the most general of arcs, but in general, the advance of capitalism under its neoliberal ethos is impressive and remarkably efficient. In effect, neoliberalism has placed at the beating heart of capital something approaching a perpetual motion machine. By privileging the individual, above all, and then protecting the same through a mechanism that insures its perpetual exposure to threat, it has engineered an almost perfectly efficient self-winding engine. Though under the mounting pressures of its constant ratcheting, one would expect its springs to break, one of the strengths of its
internalized threat is its own indemnification. Through its increasing atomization of sites of solidarity, the neoliberal engine increasingly enables the countering of counter-hegemonic energies through the systemic shorting of potential circuits of coalition. As we have suggested, the suffering of duress tends to foreshorten horizons of interest. Bound by the immediacy of duress, it is frequently difficult to take a broader view and, amid the nurtured divisions of competition, it becomes increasingly easy for more powerful interests to counter their counters by playing into the separation of their divided interests—by peeling potential allies away from one another through the selective donation of advantage. Moreover, and perhaps more troubling still, it is not uncommon to see the most disadvantaged pitted against one another—pressed into mutual antagonism rather than coming together to work against the common inequities that structure and drive their suffering. Across such divisions, then, broader questions of public good tend to be pulled apart—snapped across gaps that are in constant and contrary motion. Under such circumstances, politics itself begins to unravel.

When the only public sphere is constituted by the aggregate of private interests, the possibility of the political is routed from the outset. As we will see below, politics or public matters concerning the polis were originally constituted precisely by virtue of their being set apart from the private concerns of the home or
The reduction of public sphere to the marketplace thus utterly transforms the meaning of the political. As we noted above, here too form feigning otherwise entirely conscribes content. Given over to the embracing logic of the market, politics become substantially reduced to entrenched competitions for marketshare. Rather, that is, than dialogue, or participatory engagement in matters of common concern, political exchanges tend toward the parallel monologues of utterly divided interests—monologues that attend to one another only for the rhetorical purposes of finding weaknesses and of gaining the upper hand. Here, that is, what passes for political discourse tends toward a reductive form of command and control—toward the leveling and fending off of assaults. In a public sphere in which the very idea of public interest is always already politicized, it is hard to imagine how it could be otherwise. When the very notion of public interest is reduced to a particular position—to a specific stance within the competitive field of the political—then it is clear that the political is already standing on ground that it has lost, ceded to the economic. To the extent, that is, to which common ground has become uncommon—to which it has become interested and particular; to which it has to fight for its very standing—is the extent to which it has already lost the fight. Absent the commitment to such commonality—to a shared domain devoted to a discourse

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8 Our discussion of this classical distinction will be staged through our reading of Arendt in Chapter 1. The lines that follow—particularly with respect to the loss in the political in the face of its rededication to the protection of the private—are likewise indebted to that reading.
that exceeds the private and the particular—the political world is indeed unworlded, dis-integrated into the severed atoms that compose it.

Under the radical economization of neoliberalism, the political has, in effect, been sold in the name of a freedom that is binding to and bounded by the private. The political, in a word, has become undone. It is then with an eye toward the reopening of the political that the following pages were written. They were written, that is, with a view not toward the top-down but toward a pluralism framed otherwise than around the individual. What is central to such pluralism are not rights or freedom, but rather, responsibility—the responsibility of having to respond; of having to respond for oneself to the Other. Far from the tumefying walls of the oikos, such responsibility is about exposure—about the irremissible exposure in one’s skin; about an exposure that both precedes and exceeds the self. Given over before and beyond oneself, one is given over in a passivity that predates the very possibility of freedom. It is only in response—in gathering oneself up in reply to the

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9 Keyed by the phrasing of the otherwise than, the conception of the subject that follows is entirely indebted to the meta-ethical work of Emmanuel Levinas. Were it proper to say as much, the subject that follows is entirely his.

10 With respect to pluralism, responsibility and reason, Levinas makes the following, poignant remarks: “If . . . reason lives in language, if the first rationality gleams forth in the opposition of the face to face, if the first intelligible, the first signification, is the infinity of the intelligence that presents itself (that is, speaks to me) in the face, if reason is defined by signification rather than signification being defined by the impersonal structures of reason, if society precedes the apparition of these impersonal structures, if universality reigns as the presence of humanity in the eyes that look at me, if, finally, we recall that this look appeals to my responsibility and consecrates my freedom as responsibility and gift of self—then the pluralism of society could not disappear in the elevation to reason, but would be its condition.” Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 208.
position in which one finds oneself, outside of oneself, under the gaze of the
Other—that one is enabled to come into one’s own. The subject constituted in
responsibility, in other words, is public prior to the very possibility of its being
private. Taking such subjectivity as the basis of political identity then suggests the
possibility of a turn about—of a subject given over to its being given over, to its
exposure. Far from a threat, such exposure would serve as the basis of its calling out,
of its being drawn out into possibilities that of necessity exceed those
comprehensible within the confines of its privative and private horizons. Rather than
the jealous embrace of self-possession, such a subject, then, would take itself up
precisely in its being given over to something greater than its self. Such a sub-ject, in
other words, would not only bear, but be supported and raised up by the weight and
impossible possibilities of the political.

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Toward the end of fleshing out this subject, the work that follows is divided into two
sections, each comprising two chapters. The first section is dedicated to exploring
the development of the fully economized political subject, or homo oeconomicus. It
begins with a chapter substantially devoted to a reading of Hannah Arendt’s The
Human Condition. Working through this and allied texts, here the course of the
argument will follow a roughly outbound arc—tracing the metastatic expansion of
the oikos from the private to the public realm. Along this arc, we will pay particular
attention to the way in which Arendt leverages the classical distinction between
these two domains. Following from the classical conception of the oikos, Arendt conceives the economic, the private, in terms of the privative. According to Arendt’s description, in the classical world, anything tied to the home—and hence to the provisioning of life—was considered little more than a form of animality. As the servicing of biological need was conceived as common to all animals, anything tied to such necessity was perceived as less than fully human and as thus constituting a privation of the properly human existence uniquely available in the public, common world of the polis. Accordingly, in order to participate in the human world, one would at minimum have to be freed from the base constraints of self-preservation. For Arendt, the strength of this classical distinction rests on the way in which the private fails to rise to the level of the common, or shared, world and thus fails to world the world in a rich, culturally significant and hence durable way. Given over to the provisioning of life, reproductive labor is inextricably bound to the needs that it serves. The fruits of such labor, in other words, are consumed leaving nothing to show for themselves beyond the existences that they have continued to sustain. For Arendt, then, the fruits of such labor fall under the same shadow as the dolorous efforts needed to cultivate them: just as pain is inseparable from the affective feeling of it and thus cannot be rendered public, so too are the results of reproductive labor bound to the privative worldlessness of the private.

Arendt argues that the economization of the political took root in the midst of a different, but similarly privative worldlessness--the other worldly worldlessness
of contemplative philosophy. Given over to a transcendence that exceeds expression, such philosophy is likewise incompatible with the publicity of a public world. Indeed, such publicity—the demands and requirements of day-to-day, worldly affairs—were conceived as a nuisance, as getting in the way of the contemplative life. In an ironic turnabout, then, a philosophy that required freedom from the worldly world of politics redefined it as one of the burdens of natural existence and accordingly as something to be managed as a reproductive need. Beginning with Plato, then, the metaphysical transvaluation of the political as merely physical (as *physis*) transformed it into an extension of what had been the archetype of the private. From that point on, argues Arendt, the mainstream of Western political thought conceives of the political in terms of household management, in terms, that is, of the economic. In a further ironic twist, moreover, Arendt notes that amid its development, the economic administration of public space grew to the point that the only remaining site of freedom was the one zone apparently beyond its administrative reach—namely, the private home. In a classical twist, then, under the economization of the political the private came to be seen as the principle sphere of freedom—as the only bulwark against the domination of public administration. That this freedom was only apparent, however, brings us to the second chapter of the first section.

In this second chapter, the course of the argument turns from tracing the roughly outbound arc of the economic to pursuing an inbound one. Beginning with
early modern forms of the state already modeled on household management, Foucault, in *Naissance de la Biopolitique*, describes an economics that is internal to the logic of the political itself. Indeed, early in the lectures from which this text was produced, Foucault traces the development of the concept of “political economy” to the effort of sovereign governments to produce a principle of limitation that—unlike the external restrictions on governance drawn by such notions as natural rights—was intrinsic to the reason of state itself. From this classic liberal conception of political economy as an instrument for restraining pre-existing governments, Foucault proceeds to an extended discussion of political economy’s neoliberal renaissance. In both what he calls the *ordo-liberalism* of the GDR and the *anarcho-liberalism* of the US, Foucault identifies the economic as not simply a force for the auto-limitation of government but as the very ground of the political itself. Here economics is not just a diagnostic tool for evaluating policy, policy itself becomes the handmaiden of economics: here, that is, economic success is the only justification for political governance. Itself governed by economics, such governance takes the operative form of an economic logic. Rather than explicitly commanding or prohibiting certain behavior, this *govern-mentality* enforces its priorities by intervening in supply-and-demand curves—encouraging certain behaviors and discouraging others through altering the calculus of risk and benefit associated with them. Moreover, by limiting itself to such indirect forms of intervention, this governmentality fosters a form of subjectivity in which subjects are compelled to
take care of themselves. In the absence of a government organized to tend to their interests, neoliberal subjects are forced to look after these interests on their own, to evaluate their opportunities based on the *environmental* conditions of the market. It is at this level that the *external* logic of political economics moves back in toward the *oikos*. Under the regime of neoliberal governmentality, subjects are compelled to conceive of themselves as enterprises—each uniquely responsible for his or her own successes and failures. Here, even the innermost concerns of the biological, of the reproductive, such as child-rearing, are read through the extrinsic economics of capital (in this case, human capital) and even the most banal of domestic interactions fall sway to the logic of the transaction—a point Foucault sardonically casts in a melodramatic reenactment of the new law of the home: “Passe-moi le sel, je te donne le poivre.”¹¹ Under neoliberalism, then, we arrive at the full apotheosis of *homo oeconomicus*—a domain in which the ostensible withdrawal of governance has lead to the strictest self-government in line with the laws of the *oikos* or the economic. It is toward taking our leave from such home ground that we turn in the second major section of the text.

Toward fostering an aneconmic conception of the subject, section two begins with a wholesale deconstruction of the proper. Along these lines, the first chapter of the section entails a sustained reading across a number of Derrida’s texts.

In many ways, Derrida’s work can be broadly conceived as an intervention in the economic. From his early critique of the auto-affection of phonocentrism—a critique which he inaugurates by stating that the privilege of the phone “responds to a moment of economy (let us say of the ‘life’ of ‘history’ or ‘being as self-relationship’)”—Derrida remains deeply invested in blowing open the foreclosed self-containment of propriety. For Derrida, any self-contained interiority is always at the same time outside of itself by virtue of its relationship to the exteriority that allows it to appear as such in the first place. This, in other words, is only able to appear as such through its contradistinction to that. What this is then, in its innermost, most proper self, is its constitutive difference from that. That this is not that means that this cannot be what it is on its own, absent its relation to that.

Nevertheless, and crucially for Derrida, the relationship between this and that does not resolve into a broader unity—into a synthesis that would raise the two into an extended interiority in which both could be made present to themselves and to each other through their mediation in the larger whole. And it is precisely around such distinction that we will undertake our first exploration of Derrida’s engagement with the economic: specifically, around Derrida’s critique and critical appreciation of the “restricted economy” of Hegelianism. Ever appreciative of the power and naturalizing capacity of Hegelian logic, Derrida turns to a reading of Bataille in the effort to gesture toward an outside that can never be internalized or made at home through the movements of dialectical reason. In following Derrida through the
opening of what Bataille refers to as a “blind spot” in Hegel, we will come within sight of the furtive--of an in between or interval that can never be caught hold of on either side of its transit. That this furtive instant only shows up in the light of contradistinction, in a loss that is on the hither side of gain, of what can be made to appear, returns us to a second look at Hegelianism—to a figure that Derrida takes up in slightly later reading of Hegel: to the figure of the gift in Glas. For Derrida, a gift, in order to be a gift, has to be outside of the economics of reciprocity and return that govern the restricted circle of economy. A gift, in other words, represents a sort of total loss, but, in order for a gift to be a gift, it has to be received, that is, gained by its recipient. As soon as it is gained, however, it becomes lost to loss (just like the furtive, of which it is a figuration). For Derrida, though, just because loss is invariably given over to losing itself to gain (lost indeed, as soon as it is caught sight of as such, as loss) does not mean that it is without significance. On the contrary, it is precisely the loss that is lost sight of in gain, in the meaningful (the graspable), that keeps that which is held onto (possessed) open to both its own undoing and redoing otherwise. It is, in other words, precisely in tracing the loss that falls out of gain—at every moment, between and within each iteration—that Derrida is enabled to point toward the opening within every apparently closed circuit—within every economic loop, given over to the foreclosure of its own returns. It is, then, on the basis of such opening, of such aneconomy, that politics can be opened onto the impossibility of that which exceeds all possible expectation—that a democracy to come can be
opened onto *that which comes*, above and beyond any possibility of the prepossessed. With Derrida and the deconstruction of the economic, then, we will aim to pry open the doors of the *oikos* to a politics given over to the unforeseeable, in the name of a justice that knows no bounds.

Having pried open the doors of the *oikos*, we will, with Levinas, endeavor to step out entirely—to take leave of the privative domain of self-possession and to gesture toward a subject that could be the basis of a new politics, toward a subject figured *otherwise than* for itself. For Levinas, exposure precedes the self; it is not an opening within it—a breach within its self-containment or -possession, but rather, that which precedes and inaugurates the self *as such*. The manner of this inaugural exposure is sensibility—a sensibility whose pre-conscious corporeality Levinas figures in terms of the skin, in terms of the Ego’s exposure to exteriority in its skin. 

To speak of the *Ego*’s skin, however, is already to somewhat skew the point. Here, prior to any propriety—any propriety that would presuppose self-possession and hence a self *able* to possess—there is simply sensibility. Here, that is, prior to the possibility of the protective walls of the *oikos*, there is only the exposure of a skin undisclosed to its own boundedness. In order for these bounds to come into view—in order for the Ego to see itself in its own, proper terms (within limits that can be grasped or possessed)—it must first be exposed to its own exposure; it must, that is, be *taught* the lesson of exteriority.
Unattached to possession, it is at the outset paramount to conceive the exposure of the skin from the outside. In this sense, sensibility is to be considered not in terms of receptivity but in those of susceptibility—not in terms of a waiting to be touched but in those of an ability *to be* touched. The distinction here is deeply significant. In the first instance, receptivity is tied to interiority, to an ability or capacity extending outward toward that which is brought inside, or received. Susceptibility, on the other hand, is less of an ability than a vulnerability—less the power of a proper I, an *ipse*, than an impotence in the face of an exteriority whose arrival it cannot prevent. The sensibility of the Ego, in its skin and prior to its self, is to be understood in this latter sense.

In fleshing out this utter vulnerability, Levinas refers to the Ego as an absolute passivity, as a passivity “more passive still than the passivity of effects.” According to Levinas, the manner of this passivity exceeds even that of materiality. Unlike material objects, the very substance of which supply some resistance to the external pressure applied to them, the Ego can be pressed beneath its surface—*touched* in the very depths of its interiority. The contact that so compresses the Ego comes from the insuperable alterity of the Other. Such contact does not stop at the skin but recoils beneath it in the *psyche* to which it gives rise. Touched by a touch that it could never have foreseen, the Ego is awakened at once to that which exceeds it—to exteriority and thus to its own finitude. Pressed into its skin, beneath its skin, the Ego finds itself in a self—a self given over beyond and before itself.
Finding itself outside of itself, in a world entirely beyond its capacity, the newly minted self is compelled to respond—to answer for the space that it finds itself taking up; to answer even for the responsibility that it imposes on the Other. Pressed into its skin, the Ego is thus cored out and expelled, given to its self, as such, through its very dispossession.

Grounded in passivity, the an-archic logic at play here is paramount. Particularly in Levinas’s later accounts of the ethical encounter, it is the Other who comes first—prior, that is, to any initiative on the part of Ego, or the Same. It is, indeed, precisely this priority that sets the explosive charge of alterity. Insofar as the Other comes first, unannounced, it takes the Same entirely by sur-prise—taking it literally above and beyond its ability to take in. It is, in effect, the wholesale overwhelming of the Same by that which comes before it that teaches it the lesson of alterity. Bound to the surprise that is the very manner of Its appearance, the Other thus exceeds both the recognition and the freedom of the Same. The alterity of the Other, in other words, comes from Its coming forth, unforeseeably. Its alterity extends from its being an alterior arche, an alternate origin to the world. That the Other is such an arche does not, however, mean that the Other is, does not mean that it enters into the horizon of Being proper. As an alterior arche, the Other may certainly set events into motion, but remains, nevertheless, always behind these events—always behind the effects that manifest its causality. Were it otherwise, were the Other able to be wrapped in the events that it begins, It would cease to be
Other and would become, instead, utterly foreseeable—deterministically limited to the field of effects that it had already set in motion. The unforeseeableness of the Other is thus inextricably bound to Its unbinding of the possible—to its *archic* capacity for creating ever-new possibilities.

Even after its emergence into self-possession, then, the Same is never able to foresee the Other. Any other that could be foreseen would be nothing other than the reductive comprehension of an historical trace—of the artifacts left behind in the wake of the Other’s having passed. The Other, *qua* Other, always exceeds the freedom of the Same—defying by definition the very contours of its comprehension. The Other, that is, can never be accommodated or made at home within the interiority of the Same. On the contrary, it is precisely by virtue of its *anarchic* excess that the Other continues to perpetually explode the self-containment of the Same—ceaselessly calling it into question, into the responsibility for which it alone can answer.

Reconceiving the subject around such responsibility would open up the possibility of ever-increasing openness—of increasing sensitivity and generosity in the *face* of that to which it must respond. Far from the excoriating pain of guilt—from the sort of complex that would bind the subject in ever-tighter knots of self-attachment—here responsibility would serve to pull it ever out of itself, toward the Other to whom it must respond. Born out of the light of its own exposure, here, each response would serve to further unburden the subject of the bounds of its own
foreclosure—drawing it ever beyond its own, proper limits toward unforeseen and unforeseeable horizons. For such a subject, exteriority would appear not as a threat, but as a site of promise, of ever-new possibility. Given over to publicity, to its exposure, before being given over to itself, such a subject would be given over from the outset—indeed, from before the outset, an-archically—to that which exceeds itself; to that which is greater than itself. For such a subject, the private would indeed appear a privation--a foreshortening. Reconceiving the subject around responsibility as opposed to rights, then, would open up the possibility of an engaged and political plurality, not one given over to its parts, to the economic.
Section I:

The Birth of the Economico-political Subject

This section is dedicated to tracing the development of economics and economic subjectivity as the center of modern political life. The first chapter in this section centers on Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the metastasis of economics into the political—on the manner in which the concerns of the oikos breached the walls of the home and penetrated into the very heart of the polis. For Arendt, this development of political economy radically shifted the meaning and significance of the political. Her effort to unconceal the classical conception of the political will be central to our own reformulation of an alternate politics.¹²

The second chapter of this section effectively picks up where Arendt leaves off. With Arendt we will have seen the movement of economics into the center of political life; with Foucault, we will then see the cyclical completion of this revolution—we will, that is, see the manner in which a fully publicized, political economy circles back into the most intimate structures of the private home, penetrating into the very substance of subject formation. It will ultimately be

¹² Here, the use of the word “unconceal” is meant to reflect the decidedly Heideggerian structure of Arendt’s methodology. Though Arendt does not concern herself with the ontological disclosure of Being, her efforts to disclose the lost nature of the political operates in a similar modality to Heidegger’s pursuit.
Foucault’s rendering of the fully economized, neoliberal subject that will serve as the counter point for our own constitution of an alternate political subjectivity.
Chapter 1: Arendt

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt engages an analysis of the wholesale loss of the political—of political space as it was understood in its classical origins. According to Arendt, this loss results from the dissolution of the distinction between public and private spheres, between the *polis* and the *oikos*. Out of this dissolution, then, what emerges is a sort of hybridized space in which economic concerns, the laws of the *oikos*, come to suffuse the public sphere of the *polis*. Writ large, then, Arendt’s target in *The Human Condition* is a critique of the economization of the political with a salutary push toward a restoration of the public space of the political proper.

At the bottom of the distinction between the public and the private lies the distinction between freedom and necessity. That freedom obtains on the public side of this dichotomy already indicates the way in which Arendt’s classical understanding of freedom points toward a conception that is completely lost in the modern world. Indeed freedom as a public notion centered around the polis has been entirely inverted. Rather than being seen as mode of the political, as a mode of engagement in public life, freedom has been redefined as freedom *from* politics, as freedom *from* the public life of the polis. In order to bring this transformation into view, Arendt writes that
[w]e need go no farther than the political thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who more often than not simply identified political freedom with security. The highest purpose of politics, "the end of government," was the guaranty of security; security, in turn, made freedom possible, and the word "freedom" designated a quintessence of activities which occurred outside the political realm.¹³

Freedom in this regard meant freedom in the negative sense definitively articulated by Isaiah Berlin; this was freedom from inhibition—freedom to pursue one’s own, notably private, ends unimpeded by the demands of public life. The government, no longer a truly political entity—no longer dedicated to fostering the space for public discourse between citizens—had become, on the contrary, a means of protecting the private, of securing the freedom that could only be enjoyed in the face of the withdraw of public interference.¹⁴

According to Arendt, this inversion of freedom from its original political to its modern apolitical form began in late antiquity with the philosophical re-articulation of political thought.

Our tradition of political thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates' teachings. The fact that Socrates had not been able to persuade his judges of his innocence and his merits, which were so obvious to the better and younger of Athens's citizens, made Plato doubt the validity of persuasion.¹⁵

¹⁴ Arendt notes that even Marx adopted this position wholesale from the classical economists that he set out to critique. In Capital, Volume III, Marx notes that the development of freedom will follow from the dissolution of government—that government will no longer be necessary and as a result freedom will be secured.
Underscoring her italics, Arendt notes that the emphasis on persuasion here points to the absolute centrality of speech in classical Greek political thought. The ancient Greeks prized speech as the very form of the political. Engaging in the public space of the polis meant engaging with one’s equals. In the domain of the oikos, of the household, there was no such equality. Indeed, the oikos was given over to a very strict inequality in which the members of the household—women, children and slaves—were ruled over by the master of the house. It was substantially in contrast to this household autocracy that the particular political freedom of the polis took shape. Subject to the lord of the manner, members of the household were subject to unexceptionable necessity; ruled from above, their status was more on the order of objects than subjects—a point driven home by Aristotle’s identification of slaves with instruments in the Politics. In the polis, on the other hand, citizens—the various masters of their own households—were compelled to leave necessity and the force which it demanded on their doorsteps as they entered into public space. The polis was only accessible for those who could leave necessity behind—those

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16 As Aristotle claims: “Thus, too, a possession is an instrument for maintaining life. And so, in the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession, and property a number of such instruments; and the servant is himself an instrument which takes precedence of all other instruments. For if every instrument could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others, like the statues of Daedalus, or the tripods of Hephaestus, which, says the poet, ‘of their own accord entered the assembly of the Gods’; if, in like manner, the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre without a hand to guide them, chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves.” Aristotle and Stephen Everson, Aristotle: The Politics, trans. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 5, 1253b30-1254a1.
who could act in public space in their own terms without being driven by the
determining forces of necessity or compulsion. Accordingly, the only means for
forwarding one’s agenda in the public space of the polis was through persuasion—
through convincing others of the validity of one’s own opinion, or doxa. For the
Greeks, then, persuasion and speech were the very essence of the political. Not only
did this distinguish political space from that of the household, but it likewise
distinguished the Greek conception of politics from the despotisms of various
“barbarian” realms which were governed by the same sort of force as the Greek
household and provided no public space outside of the sheer necessity of
compulsion.

In contrast to speech and the rhetorical arts of persuasion, Greek philosophy
was centered squarely around that which could not be spoken—around that “which
to Plato was arrheton (‘unspeakable’), and to Aristotle aneu logon (‘without
word’).” Devoted to wisdom, or sophia, the philosopher was considered quite
apart from the practical world of the polis. Indeed, from the vantage of the polis—
from a vantage in which men were steeped in active debate over the worldly matter

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17 We will further engage the centrality of action and speech (i.e., acting in their own terms) below.
18 “To be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and
persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people
by violence, to command rather than persuade, were prepolitical ways to deal with people
characteristic of life outside the polis, of home and family life, where the household head
ruled with uncontested, despotic powers, or of life in the barbarian empires of Asia, whose
despotism was frequently likened to the organization of the household.” Hannah Arendt,
of human affairs—philosophers were seen as something of a “laughing stock.”

Indeed, it was the practical understanding, the common *wisdom*, of those who eschewed its more theoretical branch, that “the *sophos* who does not know what is good for himself will know even less what is good for the polis.” Philosophy and politics, then, were completely disjoint; in fact, so completely disjoint that “[t]he way of life chosen by the philosopher was understood in opposition to the *Bios Politicos*, the political way of life.” Such, at least, was the case until the trial of Socrates brought these two domains into direct conflict.

In “Philosophy and Politics,” Arendt engages in a detailed analysis of the consequences of this conflict, recounting amongst other concerns the distinctions between Plato and his teacher Socrates, between Aristotle and his teacher Plato, between the arts of philosophical dialectic and political persuasion. For our current purposes, however, as well as for those enunciated in *The Human Condition*, the pressing matter is the upshot embodied by the philosophical re-articulation of the political. Driven by the failure of Socrates to persuade his judges, Plato undertook a philosophical elaboration of the political that was directly opposed to its previous formation. Insofar as persuasion, public discourse, had failed to make a case for philosophy, Plato endeavored to invert the terms of the trial, placing the political under the unspeakable jurisdiction of philosophy. Instead of philosophy being open

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20 Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 73.
21 Ibid.
to the judgments, the opinions, or doxa, of public discourse, Plato was determined
to place public discourse, the life of the polis, under the regulation of philosophy—
under, that is, the dominion of transcendent truths that were impervious to opinion
and the swaying tides of public discourse. Moving to a domain of truth from that of
opinion, it was believed, would guarantee that such miscarriages of justice as the
execution of Socrates would no longer be possible. Moreover, though in a clearly
similar vein, the more reliable standards of transcendent truth would provide the
sort of constancy that would free philosophy from the vexations of the
contemporary—politics, given over to the transcendent truths of philosophy, would
free philosophy from the currents of the day-to-day, from the previously
unforeseeable possibilities of the polis-bound political. Politics brought under the
aegis of philosophy would, in other words, secure the very vaunted grounds for
philosophy and philosophizing itself. Freed from subjection to the opinions of the
polis, philosophy could contemplate the wordless eternal unimpeded.

Viewed from the extratemporal heights of philosophical contemplation,
then, politics was a problem to be solved—a situation to be stabilized and cordoned
off as a threat to the higher order of contemplation itself. Accordingly, far from
being the singular domain of freedom, politics was reduced to a matter of mere
necessity. The conduct of life in the polis, in other words, had to be managed like all
matters of material existence—managed precisely in order to secure the freedom
that lay precisely elsewhere. Politics was thus forcefully domesticated—removed
from the domain of freedom and re-inscribed within the walls of necessity from which it had previously, and indeed by definition, been secured. Politics, in other words, became firmly ensconced within what had been its contrary, ensconced within the sphere of the *oikos* itself. Freedom now lay on the other side of politics, in the philosophical contemplation that had been liberated from the quotidian affairs of the world.

This new freedom was not only on the other side of, but was indeed entirely contrary to, the political. As noted above, the object of philosophical contemplation was wholly without words, unspeakable and eternal. Unlike political discourse then—which by definition had to make an appearance within the public world of men\(^{23}\)—philosophical freedom was a singular affair, private and confined to the fleeting apprehension of the contemplator. Contrary to the public expression that had been the very essence of freedom in the *polis*, this new freedom was an entirely private matter—indeed a matter entirely foreclosed from any form of disclosure:

> Yet it is decisive that the experience of the eternal . . . has no correspondence with and cannot be transformed into any activity whatsoever, since even the activity of thought, which goes on within one’s self by means of words, is obviously not only inadequate to render it but would interrupt and ruin the experience itself.\(^{24}\)

Amending the relocation of the political noted above, then, it was less that the

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\(^{23}\) “Men” in this context was precisely a requirement. As we have seen and will see in more detail, women, children and slaves were relinquished to the interior domain of the *oikos.*

\(^{24}\) Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 20. See also Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 100: this singularity was singularly at odds with the political—i.e., that the philosopher was the only one unable to express a public opinion insofar as the matter of his concern was beyond all expression (rendering the philosopher the unknowing laughing stock referenced above).
political was moved into the oikos than that the oikos and the polis effectively switched places.\textsuperscript{25} As the organizing principle of necessity, the nomos or law of the oikos (economics), became the very center of public life; conversely, freedom, freedom from necessity, became a strictly private matter.

With the philosophical transvaluation of the political, the public sphere, the very world of the polis, was thus lost as a site of freedom; only theoria, or contemplation, remained beyond the pail of necessity. According to Arendt, the loss of this world, indeed of wordliness itself, was by no means incidental to the philosophical project. As noted above, the excision of the contingency of doxa was part and parcel of the philosophical re-articulation of the political. The substitution of the eternal, of transcendent standards, for the contingent, however, meant that the principles governing the political were no longer of this world. Rather than principles emerging from the active engagement of free and equal citizens in public space, political principles were now imposed from the beyond—precisely with an eye toward containing contingency. Active engagement in the world and worldly affairs was thus actively subordinated to the inactivity of contemplation.

\textsuperscript{25} “Effectively” here should perhaps be emphasized as prior to the philosophical re-articulation of the political; when politics and philosophy co-existed as parallel domains, they each provided a site of freedom, as Arendt notes with respect to Aristotle. That philosophical “freedom,” however, was not esteemed as such by the broader public is precisely indicated by the public derision of the impracticality of philosophers noted above. Indeed, as Arendt notes in “What is Freedom?”, freedom was never a philosophical concept in the ancient world. Freedom was only understood in the political sense indicated above. Though philosophers may have held their contemplative liberation from the worldly as freedom, such freedom had no resonance until the philosophical re-inscription of the political took hold following the collapse of the ancient polis.
As perhaps the central claim of *The Human Condition*, Arendt highlights this wholesale eclipse of the active life, or *vita activa*, by the theoretical life of the *vita contemplativa*. Indeed, as she notes, so firmly has this eclipse been rooted within the tradition of Western philosophical and political thought, that “[t]raditionally . . . the term *vita activa* receives its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*; its very restricted dignity is bestowed upon it because it serves the needs and wants of contemplation in a living body.”26 As we have seen, with the rise of the contemplative, the active life of free political engagement, like all active life is reduced to mere necessity. “To the ancient freedom from the necessities of life and from compulsion by others, the philosophers added freedom and surcease from political activity (*skhole*).”27 The very idea that there could be freedom in an active life—in the sort of public activity that in fact served as its original source—became and (according to Arendt) has remained unthinkable throughout the tradition of Western thought. Indeed, so deeply has the identification of freedom with political activity been buried that even modern rejections of the *vita contemplativa* remain bound by its terms.

According to Arendt, even such revolutionary thinkers as Marx and Nietzsche have remained firmly inscribed within the structure of the *vita contemplativa*. In their respective rejections of the contemplative, they have simply inverted its

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27 Ibid., 14.
terms—privileging the material world of necessity or life over the abstractions of idealism or life-denying metaphysics and religion. Though clearly critical of the contemplative, such philosophers merely took up and privileged its antithesis; in so doing, they failed to discover the political form of freedom that was excised from the very architecture of the contemplative. For Arendt, the key is not simply that the worldly life offers an alternative to the contemplative, but that the worldly was and is more than the blind necessity that contemplation has made it out to be. Within the worldly, there is a site of freedom, indeed the very source of freedom, waiting to be reclaimed. Reclaiming this source, revealing the lost freedom of political life, is central to Arendt’s work and thought. In order to get a better sense of this world and of the sort of freedom to which it gives rise, we will have to proceed through Arendt’s classical archeology below.

**The Earth and the World**

As we have seen, the contemplative turn toward the eternal folded the world of worldly affairs into the matter of mere necessity. From the vantage of the eternal, the extratemporal domain of timelessness, everything within the world appeared contingent and unreliable. Indeed, as indicated above, the substantial impetus behind the philosophical revaluation of the political was to reduce this contingency—to cordon the contingent off from the contemplative in order to
indemnify the higher order of the eternal from the unpredictable groundswells of public discourse. The ethereally anchored collapse of the entirety of temporality into the dark matter of necessity, however, utterly covered over the worldly form of durability which, according to Arendt, was at the very heart of the distinction between the human realm of freedom and the animal domain of necessity. Unlike eternity, the timeless depths of which could only be plumbed in the privacy of contemplation, human *immortality* was a form of durability comprised precisely by dint of its sheer publicity. Emerging out of events within the world, from within the very substance of worldly entanglement, such immortality provided a timely form of permanence which served as the very basis of the common world—a world in which events were seen, remembered and shared. It is in uncovering this worldly form of durability, then, that we will best be able to envisage Arendt’s reconstitution of the world of the *polis*; in order to do so, however, we will first need to look into the timeless necessity from which it stood apart.

The timeless necessity from which the human world was distinguished was that of the natural, biological world. Though itself a form of worldly permanence, the immortality of nature was different in kind from the human immortality which it, in part, inspired. ²⁸ The immortality of nature was of a cyclical, circular form—operating along the curvilinear lines of the eternal recurrence that Arendt lauds

²⁸ Arendt notes that the Greek desire for immortality was inspired by both the immortality of nature and the immortality of the gods, but as we will see further below, the human immortality of the *polis* was radically different from the natural form with which it was by definition juxtaposed. *Arendt, The Human Condition*, 19-20.
Nietzsche for recognizing as the key to any form of lebenphilosophie.\(^{29}\) In effect, through the perpetual replenishment of its species, nature provided a form of worldly permanence. Over the broad, circular sweep of continuous cycles of birth and death, that is, species would persist in a sort anonymous everlastingness. Though in its way impervious to time, nature is likewise, and indeed for the self-same reasons, bound to necessity. It is only through the perpetual repetition of its cycles that nature can bridge the rush of time and appear immortal. Any deviation from its natural orders would cause the changeless to have changed and thus bring mortality to what was no longer in the repertoire of repetition—anything unrepeated, like an extinct species, would have, necessarily, become mortal. The immortality of nature, then, demands preservation along lines well-trod; and of course, walking in such well-trodden footsteps leaves no trace of the singularity of one’s passing.

In the classical world, it was precisely such rhythmic preservation that was the province of the oikos. The oikos was the domain of birth and death, of the perpetuation of the family. It was likewise the domain for the provisioning of life—for providing for the necessities of human existence between birth and death. In contradistinction to work, Arendt terms the effort given over to such provisioning, labor. Unlike work—which by Arendt’s definition produces durable goods—the key

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\(^{29}\) “A philosophy of life that does not arrive, as did Nietzsche, at the affirmation of "eternal recurrence" (ewige Wiederkehr) as the highest principle of all being, simply does not know what it is talking about.” Arendt, The Human Condition, 97.
characteristic of labor is that it leaves no trace of its efforts behind. Just as with nature, in whose orbit it operates, labor is invisibly absorbed into the perpetuation of life. Labor, that is, is inextricably bound and confined to the needs that it serves; its fruits are consumed—wholesale—leaving nothing to show for themselves beyond the biological existences that they have continued to sustain. As with all the repetitive cycles of nature, the task of labor is never complete: the sustaining consumption that is its end is only ever the beginning of a renewed demand for its efforts. Inscribed in such chains of necessity, labor is no different from the natural animality of any species. Like all natural processes, it is both endless and anonymous. Accordingly, for the ancient Greeks, the laborious life of the oikos was a truly privative life—a life deprived of the specifically human existence characterized by life in the polis. As we have seen, freedom from necessity was the foremost prerequisite for engagement in the public life of the polis. Conversely, enchainment to the biological, to the endless ends of bestial necessity, was paramount to the privative conception of the private. “One of the characteristics of privacy . . . was that man existed in this sphere not as a truly human being but only as a specimen of the animal species man-kind.”\(^\text{30}\) Bound to the endless turns of cyclical nature, life in the oikos was unable to depart from the well-trodden course of necessity; kept in line by the demands of the perpetuation of the species, it was never able to step out from the hidden depths of interiority. It was private, irremissibly so; not only were

its fruits devoid of public appearance, but so too was the very manner of its efforts doubled over in a silence born of necessity.

As Arendt notes, prior to the “revolutionary transformation of laboring,” the word labor “had [always] been connected with hardly bearable ‘toil and trouble,’ with effort and pain.” Labor was understood as a painful process and, like pain, was utterly private in its utter incommunicability.

[T]he most intense feeling we know of, intense to the point of blotting out all other experiences, namely, the experience of great bodily pain, is at the same time the most private and least communicable of all. Not only is it perhaps the only experience which we are unable to transform into a shape fit for public appearance, it actually deprives us of our feeling for reality to such an extent that we can forget it more quickly and easily than anything else. There seems to be no bridge from the most radical subjectivity, in which I am no longer "recognizable," to the outer world of life. Pain, in other words, truly a borderline experience between life as "being among men" \((inter homines esse)\) and death, is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all.32

Pain is the privative \textit{par excellence}. Under its tormenting impress, the subject is squeezed out of any shared reality—pressed into the biological confines of the body. As Elaine Scarry notes in \textit{The Body in Pain}, even the self, the very contents of consciousness, are lost to pain; not only does one lose the world through the inability to communicate, one also loses the very substance of one’s unique existence.33 Like the pain in which it is inscribed, labor constricts one to the merely

\textsuperscript{31} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 48.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 50-51.
\textsuperscript{33} “It is the intense pain that destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the
The only activity which corresponds strictly to the experience of worldlessness, or rather to the loss of world that occurs in pain, is laboring, where the human body, its activity notwithstanding, is also thrown back upon itself, concentrates upon nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning. We mentioned before the twofold pain connected with the life process for which language has but one word [namely, labor] and which according to the Bible was imposed upon the life of man together, the painful effort involved in the reproduction of one's own life and the life of the species.³⁴

Both the reproduction and the reproductive labor required to preserve the biological are bound to the privative by the dolorous nature of their efforts. Just as with its utterly perishable fruits, so too then does the very effort of labor fall under the shadow of an invisible privacy. Bound to the body, the life of labor is without world.

As noted above, such life, the life of the oikos, failed for the Greeks to rise to the level of the “truly human.”³⁵ Shared with the entirety of animality, biological life

³⁴ Ibid., 115.
³⁵ The discussion of worldlessness and the inhumanity of the merely biological here make the resonance with Heidegger’s conception of the world poverty, or weltarm nature of animals, difficult to miss. The distinction here between the two senses of world-poverty, however, is equally if not more important. For Heidegger, animals are incapable of the as structure which would allow them to understand objects in the world as components of a broader, contextual world. Instead, according to Heidegger, animals perceive things only in their immediate sensibility (as hot, as smooth, etc.). The failure to weave a contextual understanding precisely marks the failure to have a world. For Arendt, on the contrary, and as we will see further below, the world is entirely a public matter. Though the importance of Mitandersein, of being with others, in Heidegger is very debatable, I believe it would be a difficult case to make Mitandersein the very center of the world in which Dasein finds itself.
missed entirely what it was to be human, to be distinctly human.\textsuperscript{36} Accordingly, the sort of immortality which biology affords, the natural immortality of a species, likewise missed what it was for a human being to become immortal.

In contrast to its natural, eternally recurrent antecedent, the Greek conception of human immortality arose precisely out of its converse, out of mortality itself. Unlike animals, confined to the generic, cyclical stream ever-flowing into the preservation of the species, human beings were conceived in their uniqueness, in their individuality. As Arendt writes:

Men are "the mortals," the only mortal things in existence, because unlike animals they do not exist only as members of a species whose immortal life is guaranteed through procreation. The mortality of men lies in the fact that individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life. This individual life is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movement of biological life. This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order.\textsuperscript{37}

The distinction of being human was thus distinction itself. Each human life, at least each \textit{truly} human life, was considered unique—with an identifiable beginning and end that stood out from the ceaseless currents of the generic, of the species. More than isomorphic links in the chain that was seen to bind animality, human beings

\textsuperscript{36} With reference to the necessity of human beings to live together in order to survive, Arendt notes, with Plato and Aristotle, that what is shared with animality cannot be considered fundamentally human: “[Social life] was something human life had in common with animal life, and for this reason alone it could not be fundamentally human.” Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 24.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 18-19.
were conceived as able to depart from the well-scripted roles of natural recurrence. Humans could act in ways that were unique, both unforeseen and unforeseeable. Their lives did not simply reproduce—either the species or the lives of those that preceded them. On the contrary, each human life charted its own course, from beginning to end, in a manner which, following the language of Arendt, cut across the very circularity of the biological. In their distinctness, human lives were thus wholly given over to mortality. Precisely because of their distinction, such lives could not be carried on, naturally, in the species—such carriage could only body forth the generic. Accordingly, another form of distinction was required to add durability to the mortal lives of human beings.

The distinction that provided for human immortality was public distinction—distinction for a life or act that appeared and bore remembrance within the shared life of the polis. Human immortality thus both responded to and required distinction. To be human and not merely an instance of the species homo sapiens, meant to be distinct, unique and irreplaceable, to be mortal; to stave off this mortality, to achieve immortality, required that one’s uniqueness be distinguished, that it stand apart from the quotidian cycles of repetitive necessity. Unlike natural immortality, whose efforts were seen to disappear beneath the endless waves of generation, the human form required that the endeavors which it stood to immortalize show up—that they make an appearance, even a grand appearance, on the open stage of public life. Human immortality could never abide within the anonymous confines of
dolorous labor; it could never be housed within the invisible and the private. On the contrary, such immortality rested fundamentally on publicity, on the shared perception and remembrance of the *polis*. In order for a human life to rise to the level of immortality, to surpass the mortal confines of its singularity, it had to be seen—to be seen and passed on, to be recounted. Far from the anonymity of natural immortality, such recounting precisely required an identity—a singular name attached to a singular human being who shone forth precisely in his singularity. Only such a man, a man who distinguished himself in the public light of the *polis*, could expect to outlast his biological finitude; only in standing apart, amongst others, could he hope to garner the truly human form of immortality. Based both on mortality and publicity, on distinctness and commonality, such immortality points decidedly away from the natural—away from the biological bedrock of the earth and toward the world.

For the ancient Greeks, the world which was the *polis* both emerged out of and served the needs of human immortality. Absent the temporal durability of immortality, there could be no common world.

If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men.

Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no

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38 The importance of a name is central to action, which, as we will see, Arendt distinguishes from both labor and work, as the defining characteristic of the *vita activa*: “Action without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it, is meaningless, whereas an art work retains its relevance whether or not we know the master’s name.” Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180-181.
politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible. . . . [T]he common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us.  

Without the durability of human immortality, the world would disappear like all the fruits of nature with each passing generation, indeed, with each passing life. Without something to hold onto, to carry on and carry forward, there would be no world, only the dispersal of private needs tracing the indelible, invisible footsteps of natural recurrence. Immortality thus provided the foundation for the common world, but it was the pursuit of immortality that in turn provided its substance. As noted above, it was only that which stood out from within the public light of the common world that earned the imprimatur of immortality. While immortality provided the shared world in which something could show up, what showed up in turn became part of the very legacy of the shared. What emerged in the public world, in other words, became part of the very substance of that world—held in trust against the intrinsic perishability of the natural.  

Comprised out of the stores of the remembered, the common world of the polis was a world apart from nature. Not only was it preserved against perishing, against natural decay, but the very structure of its commonality diverged from the

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39 Arendt, The Human Condition, 55.  
40 As Arendt puts it, “It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time.” Ibid.
generic collectivity of the natural. Comprised out of distinctions past, what was common about the common world was diametrically distant from the shared and anonymous inheritance of biology. Here, the common did not sift silently beneath the waves of generation—passing from one to the next in the unremarkable sameness of endless repetition. Here, on the contrary, what was held in common was the uncommon, the distinct, the unique. As noted above, it was precisely the uniqueness of each human life that both marked its mortality and provided for the very possibility of its immortalization. Only the remarkable could enter the preserve of the common. Beyond the natural, moreover, such unique commonality likewise diverged from the meta-physical. The commonness of the common world, that is, likewise stood in contrast to transcendent universality—to the eternal self-sameness of metaphysical essences. Such commonness was not outside of time but emerged precisely in history as stories kept alive, as histories held within the collective recollection of the public. What was common about the common world, then, neither rose up from the temporal repetition of the biological nor descended from the extratemporal heights of transcendent eternity. What was common was the common trust of shared particularities.

Predicated on particularity, such commonality did not endeavor to overcome

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41 Unlike a biological genus, a metaphysical one does not rely upon timely repetition for its constancy; on the contrary, it wholly exceeds the iterative consistency of constancy by virtue of its wholesale extratemporality—of its eternal, essential “nature.” Nevertheless, and as suggested above, such essences—insofar as they can only be envisioned within the purely privative state of contemplation—share similarly private quarters with their natural analogs.
or suppress differences but, to the contrary, required them. Accordingly, the commonality of the public world was rooted firmly in plurality.

[T]he reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life. . . .

The meaning here, arising from diversity, was for Arendt the very basis of objectivity in the life of the polis. It was only insofar as a plurality of participants in public life could take up diverse perspectives around a single object that the object could ever arise to the level of objectivity. Though by definition no two members of the public could hold precisely the same position with respect to an object, the fact that they held the same object in view was what established its reality as something more than a matter of mere subjectivity. Unlike the purely privative, subjective dimension of pain, which we noted above, a public object, be it material or simply an object of discussion, could be held in common from a great plurality of views at once. Indeed, it was precisely this possibility of plural commonality that allowed such objects to form the very basis of the common world. Public objects served to organize views, granting them a shared point of focus without extinguishing their diversity. The

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42 Arendt, The Human Condition, 57.
common world, then, was a world comprised of objects that could bring people together without fusing them. It was indeed a world held in common, but without any of the sort of identity that would reduce its polyvocality to a consonant and unitary voice. In a particularly lucid metaphor, Arendt suggests that this world functioned like a table. Around a table, people are both brought together and held apart, brought into relation and separated all at once. In its plural commonality, the common world thus functioned like a table and like a table it needed to be built.

According to Arendt, the durability of the common world rested substantially on the material production of that world. Absent reification, the great words and deeds of public life would disappear beneath the mists of time.

The "doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words" will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed. . . . [A]cting and speaking men [men in public life] need the help of homo faber [fabricating man] in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all.

Without the material products of homo faber, nothing of the uniqueness of human lives could be preserved—held in trust against the natural decay that attends the passing of time. Without such products, that is, there could be no common world—

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43 According to Arendt, this sort of consonance is particularly endemic to mass society in which individuals are bound, under the pressures of conformism, to replicating one shared perspective. (We will take the question of conformism up further below.) Arendt, The Human Condition, 8.
44 Ibid., 52.
no world held in common across the generations; no center of gravity holding the irreducible plurality of perspectives in its orbit. In order to be held in common, the common world needed to be built and the building of this world fell to the province of what Arendt refers to as work.

In contrast to labor, the very object of work is leaving a trace—leaving its objects behind. Unlike labor, the efforts of which are consumed in the course of its process, work produces durable goods that succeed its process and are indeed its very objective. Work, that is, aims precisely at what survives its efforts—at the product produced through its endeavors. In this way, work serves as a means to an end. According to Arendt, this means-end logic is the governing principle of work.

The process of making is itself entirely determined by the categories of means and end. The fabricated thing is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it (“the process disappears in the product,” as Marx said) and that it is only a means to produce this end. Labor, to be sure, also produces for the end of consumption, but since this end, the thing to be consumed, lacks the worldly permanence of a piece of work, the end of the process is not determined by the end product but rather by the exhaustion of labor power, while the products themselves, on the other hand, immediately become means again, means of subsistence and reproduction of labor power. In the process of making, on the contrary, the end is beyond doubt: it has come when an entirely new thing with enough durability to remain in the world as an independent entity has been added to the human artifice. As far as the thing, the end product of fabrication, is concerned, the process need not be repeated.\footnote{Arendt, The Human Condition, 143.}

In the very substance of their durability, the products of work are ineluctably human. They withstand the thrall of natural decay and thereby defy the cyclical,
interminable demand for repetition. It is precisely in this capacity to withstand that such products are enabled to memorialize and preserve—to constitute the very foundations of the common, human world. Work, then, unlike labor is an essentially human aspect of the \textit{vita activa}—an aspect unique to humans, not to be found in the animal world. Nevertheless, despite this intrinsic humanity, work did not for the ancient Greeks rise to the level of the truly human—to the level found in the public life of the \textit{polis}.

Governed by means and ends, the objectives of work would appear secure in their objectivity—in their objective independence as self-standing objects. Work aims at the production of products. In order to achieve such ends, to produce such products, it must proceed from a model or idea which serves as the template for the product to be produced. It is only through having such a model in place beforehand that work can progress toward and ultimately achieve its end. Unlike the interminable cycles of nature, then, “[t]o have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication.”\textsuperscript{47} Inscribed firmly within such limits, work and its definitively-cast products would thus appear wholly discrete and self-contained—clearly delineated by beginning and end. Contrary then to the constant turns and returns of the elements of nature, work and its products would seem bounded and fixed. According to Arendt, however, the self-same logic that binds work likewise undoes its fixity.

\textsuperscript{47} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 143.
Inscribed within the logic of means and ends, work is given over entirely to the demands of utility. “During the work process, everything is judged in terms of suitability and usefulness for the desired end, and for nothing else.”

Accordingly, work would seem to be given over to a standard against which it could be measured objectively. However, insofar as the domain of work provides no other standards for measuring its successes, each standard, or end to be achieved, is likewise subject to the question of its own utility. Each end, in other words, is given over in turn to the question of its own utility in the service of the end that it was itself intended to achieve. In order to evaluate the utility of any given bit of work, then, the end of that work must in turn be evaluated as a means toward yet another end, toward the end which is its aim—and so on, ad infinitum. Accordingly, under the standards of means and ends, what would have seemed to have been discrete and self-standing—namely, the neatly delimited and measurable objectivity of work and its products—quickly becomes anything but. Amid the indefinite substitution of means for ends, the logic of utility ultimately becomes end-less and likewise, meaningless.

According to Arendt, within the conceptual regime of “utilitarianism, the philosophy of homo faber par excellence, . . . the distinction between utility and meaningfulness, which we express linguistically by distinguishing between ‘in order to’ and ‘for the sake of’” becomes lost. Within utilitarianism, meaning becomes

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conflated with utility, such that the only sake for which anything is done is in order to achieve some end. The endlessness just noted, however, leaves utilitarianism without any internal resources to ground its perpetual machinations.

Obviously there is no answer to the question which Lessing once put to the utilitarian philosophers of his time: "And what is the use of use?" The perplexity of utilitarianism is that it gets caught in the unending chain of means and ends without ever arriving at some principle which could justify the category of means and end, that is, of utility itself. The "in order to" has become the content of the "for the sake of"; in other words, utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness.\(^{50}\)

Unable to generate the sort of ends that would justify its means and thus grant it meaning, utility is restricted to the pure and rarified means of instrumentality. Insofar as it can find no ends, the gaze of instrumentality transforms everything into means. Beneath this gaze, even the world of nature loses its independent self-standing and is transformed into a simple means toward the endless ends of *homo faber*.

It was for no other reason than this attitude of *homo faber* to the world that the Greeks in their classical period declared the whole field of the arts and crafts, where men work with instruments and do something not for its own sake but in order to produce something else, to be *banausic*, a term perhaps best translated by "philistine," implying vulgarity of thinking and acting in terms of expediency.\(^{51}\)

In its own terms, then, the instrumentalizing world of work has no room for meaning, only for means. Though it builds the world, its own logic is insufficient for

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 156-157.
making that world truly human. In order to find what is truly human in the world, then, we must with Arendt turn away from the endlessness of ends foreseen and toward the unanticipatable beginnings of action.

**Action and its Other**

According to Arendt’s tripartite schema, action is the third component of the *vita activa* and the only one essential to a truly human life.

Men can very well live without laboring, they can force others to labor for them, and they can very well decide merely to use and enjoy the world of things without themselves adding a single useful object to it; the life of an exploiter or slaveholder and the life of a parasite may be unjust, but they certainly are human. A life without speech and without action, on the other hand . . . is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.⁵²

A life without speech and action, that is, would fail to show up, to make itself seen within the human world. Such a life would be relegated to the same anonymity that abides within the cycles of nature and, by extension, within the life of the *oikos* organized to tend to those cycles. Though a human being could live without laboring, a merely laboring being trapped within the enclosure of the *oikos* would, as we have seen, fail to rise to the level of a truly human existence. Speech and action, then, serve to make a life stand out—to show up in the unimpeachable uniqueness

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that is the distinct marker of a truly human life. Speech and action, however, are not incidental—are not simply one means of distinguishing a life amongst others. What is distinct about human uniqueness is that, unlike with other elements of the world, such uniqueness does extend from without; it is not applied as a form of discrimination between two objects separated through their comparable differences. On the contrary, human uniqueness arises from within, from the innate capacity of human beings to distinguish themselves—to speak and act for themselves, in their own name; to express themselves; to make *themselves* show up.

In speaking and acting, human beings thus spring out from within. In so doing, they reveal themselves as unique sites of origination—as initiators of speech and action, innately capable of setting something new into motion.

To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, "to begin," "to lead," and eventually "to rule," indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*). Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.53

It is precisely this capacity to begin something new that distinguishes human beings in their individuality from the anonymous circularity of nature. As noted above, human lives cut “rectilinear” paths across the circular turns of the eternal recurrence that characterizes nature. By starting something new, human beings are able to

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stand out, to become unprecedented, unique—to become, in other words, truly human. It is only in stepping out of the well-trodden paths of what has come before that human beings can take up their non-natural, distinctly human birthright as initiators. Because such stepping out must by definition diverge from the predictable, it must always make its appearance in the form of what Arendt refers to as a miracle.

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.54

Miraculous in its departure from precedent, action is utterly unforeseeable; it emerges without pattern or prefiguration through the singular initiative of the actor, or arche, who sets it into motion. In direct contrast, then, to the fully predictable ends of work, action is characterized by wholly unpredictable beginnings—by beginnings which erupt onto the scene as if from out of nowhere.55 In their absolute

54 Arendt, The Human Condition, 178. Arendt makes a similar claim in “What is Freedom?”: Every act, seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a "miracle" that is, something which could not be expected. If it is true that action and beginning are essentially the same, it follows that a capacity for performing miracles must likewise be within the range of human faculties. Arendt, “What is Freedom?”, 169.
55 It is worth noting that the emphasis here on beginnings, as opposed to ends, marks a dramatic distinction between Arendt and Heidegger. While for Heidegger, death—particularly in its early guise as being-toward-death—has primacy in marking the factual finitude of human existence, for Arendt, it is beginning, which she specifically refers to as a
originality, such beginnings are inseparable from what they begin; they emerge, that is, only in the midst of that which they set into motion. In this way, such beginnings point toward a fundamental distinction dividing the very modalities of work and action.

In distinguishing between work and action, Arendt follows the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*—terms which roughly translate as *making* and *doing*, respectively. Through its machinations *poiesis* aims at making something and, consequently, at the thing made. Its object, then, is external to it as the product or end of its process. As noted above, this form of activity was seen by the Greeks as being derivative insofar as it was done for the sake of something else—something external to its operation. *Praxis*, on the other hand, is characterized by an activity whose end is internal to the activity itself. In fleshing out this distinction, Aristotle frequently makes recourse to the technical arts to exemplify the former and the performing arts to exemplify the latter, as in the following passage from the *Magna Moralia*:

> When things are made and done, that which makes and that which does them are not the same. For the arts of making have some other

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form of natality, which is key. That Arendtian natality refers to the second, public birth in political life, however, opens it up to questions about its own existential framing. Along these lines, see Lisa Guenther’s *The Gift of the Other*, in which she claims that the occlusion of the unchosen, and thus unfree natality (which comes as a gift from the mother), by the freely chosen natality of political life indicates a powerful existential desire to reclaim one’s self as the source of one’s own beginning. This willful occlusion marks the erasure of the central aneconomic gift of the Other that indeed was responsible for giving one’s self. We return to this aneconomic, an-arche below, both with reference to the work of Derrida and Levinas.
end beyond the making; for instance, beyond housebuilding, since that is the art of making a house, there is a house as its end beyond the making, and similarly in the case of carpentry and the other arts of making; but in the processes of doing there is no other end beyond the doing; for instance, beyond playing the harp there is no other end, but just this is the end, the activity and the doing.⁵⁶

*Praxis* or action, then, is a form of activity in which the end of the activity is coextensive with and inseparable from the performance of the activity itself. Unlike work, or *poiesis*, such activity does not operate in the domain of potential (*dynamis*) reaching toward an actuality (*energeia*) which exceeds it. On the contrary, in action “the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself which therefore becomes an *entelecheia* [a sort of end in itself], and the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process but is embedded in it; the performance is the work, is *energeia.*”⁵⁷

In their revelatory character, speech and action fall precisely under this

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⁵⁶ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, in *Aristotle: Metaphysics, Books 10-14* (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1935), 1197a1-10. Aristotle frequently refers to the arts of housebuilding, weaving and even medicine when speaking of *poiesis*; in terms of *praxis*, playing the harp and playing the flute are common examples, but so too are references to the perceptual faculty of seeing. For an example of the latter, see Aristotle, *Aristotle: Metaphysics, Books 10-14*, 1050a30-34. For her part, Arendt primarily refers to examples from the performing arts, as in the following explanation of Machiavelli’s concept of *virtu*: “Its meaning is best rendered by ‘virtuosity,’ that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making), where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it.” Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?”, 153.

⁵⁷ With regard to the notion of an end in itself, it is important to take some care here. In the Aristotelian concept of *entelechiae*, something enacts the realization (*energeia*) of its potential (*dynamis*) precisely through the activity of being what it is—what it is, in other words, is inseparable from its process of unfolding as what it is. Here there is no idea of an external model that is being striven toward, no being that is being aimed at by becoming. On the contrary, here being is the becoming.
performative guise of *praxis*. Speech and action, in other words, reveal the initiatory and thus uniquely human aspect of the actor through the very process of their being performed. In speaking, the speaker both reveals and is revealed in her capacity as a speaker—as one capable of distinguishing herself, as one capable of putting forward a new and unique perspective. More broadly, then, through the very act of setting something in motion, one reveals oneself, reflexively, as being truly human—as being able to initiate something without precedent. Though one could imagine an artifact, like a book, preserving the revelation of a human being, for Arendt, such artifacts eclipse the human life that stood (and indeed no longer stand) behind them. With art, that is, the work of art, standing on its own, becomes an object of self-standing interest that thereby occludes the artist. “Action without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it,” she writes, “is meaningless, whereas an art work retains its relevance whether or not we know the master’s name.” ⁵⁸ Art, in its production of a work, is *poietically* opposed to the self-expression of *praxis* in which a self expresses itself through the very act of its expression—expresses itself, that is, as a self through the very performance of its self-expression. The only way art, or the reified artifacts of a human life can once again come to life is by being recollected, by being taken up as objects in the world around and through which human action and indeed, inter-action, can be given shape (as with the example of the table referenced above).

To regard speech in its merely revelatory character—in its merely formal capacity to reveal a speaker as one capable of initiatory action—may, however, appear to obscure the potentially more teleological aspect of its content. In the public realm (the only domain in which speech *qua* speech is possible—the only domain in which it shows up, is heard) speech, that is, may well appear *poietically* poised toward the end that its speaker aims to achieve. In this realm, in other words, speech may well appear as a merely instrumental means—as a means directed toward the end of convincing others. Such an appearance, however, entirely misses the plural modality of political life. Here, convincing others requires that these others, as unique sites of their own *archic* initiative, allow themselves to be convinced. Unlike *poiesis*, then, where the end to be achieved is impressed unilaterally upon the inert substance of its material, engaging in the public life of the *polis* means engaging explicitly with other sites of unforeseeability, with other human beings. Though Arendt does provide for the possibility of compulsion—of the tyrannical imposition of one will upon others—for her, such compulsion operates on the level of violence and not on what she defines as the properly political level of power.

“*Power,*” she writes, “corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and
remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.”\textsuperscript{59} Power, then, does not operate on the level of the individual actor or speaker, but emerges from within the group itself. Accordingly, it relies on all those who comprise the group and on their continued willingness to remain together and to act in concert. Violence, on the other hand, stands apart from, stands over and above the group upon which it is exercised. It acts as a means employing domination and coercion to compel the group toward ends that are not its own: “[v]iolence is distinguished by its instrumental character.”\textsuperscript{60} Like all forms of poiesis, it is perpetrated not for its own sake but for the sake of the end which it aims to impose upon the group. Power, on the contrary, is inextricably intrinsic to the group from within which it emerges; it can in no way be divorced from the active cooperation of those who act in concert. The extent to which power is separated from its subjects—the extent to which they become subjected rather than acting subjects—is the extent to which power is transformed into violence. As noted above, the household or oikos was characterized by such top-down rule. Not so the polis:

The polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only "equals," whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality. To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled.\textsuperscript{61}

Insofar as the members of the polis neither ruled nor were ruled, they each

\textsuperscript{59} Hannah Arendt, On Violence (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 44.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{61} Arendt, The Human Condition, 32.
preserved their unpredictable integrity as *actors*—as those *free* to act unforeseeably. As we have seen, such unforeseeability was the very basis for the insuperable plurality of the *polis*. By virtue of this plurality, political outcomes or ends were entirely unpredictable. When engaging in the political realm, then, one could not *poietically* dictate certain ends, but only initiate unpredictable beginnings. One could not, that is, act on the political but only within the political, within the *polis*, as a part of its organic plurality. Accordingly, whatever emerged from within the *polis* at any given moment was inseparable from the performativity of that moment itself; insofar as power remained with those who organically composed it, the next moment could be entirely different, and so on. Power, then, was a living form, performed in the very life of engagement in the *polis*. It was, in other words, unimpeachably *praxis* and only insofar as it remained *praxis*—inextricable from the gyrations of its own pluralistic performativity—did it remain political in the fullest sense of the free engagement in public life.

As noted above, such dynamism did not rest easily with Greek philosophers. For one thing, the unpredictable nature of politics meant that anything could happen. Even philosophy could not be protected from perturbations within the political realm—as we saw earlier with respect to the trial of Socrates. On another, quite related note, insofar as politics was pure *praxis*, it demanded a perpetual embeddedness within the worldly. Insofar, that is, as political life could not be

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62 We will further engage this conception of freedom below.
separated from the living of that life, from its organic unfolding, it demanded constant attention to the day-to-day affairs of the human world. Such mundane devotion, of course, would have proved a profound hindrance to the transcendentally-oriented philosophers. Consequently, and as noted above, the philosophers undertook the reframing of the political in philosophical terms. For Arendt, the work of this reframing was patterned precisely on the logic of poiesis.

According to Arendt, the very structure of Platonic ideas took shape around the poietic notion of making. “In so far,” she writes, “as his teaching was inspired by the word idea or eidos (‘shape’ or ‘form’), which he used for the first time in a philosophical context, it rested on experiences in poiesis or fabrication.” Though Arendt does not believe that the notion of Platonic ideas was political at its outset, she maintains that the subsequent importation of these craft-inspired ideas into the domain of the political served to shore up its more unpredictable aspects. Bringing the ideas down to earth—down into the cave—however, did require some translation. While, originally, the ideas were about beauty and thus given over to a silent form of contemplation, in the political context, they were reduced to a pragmatic conception of the “good” which provided for their use as standards and measures.

The Platonic wish to substitute making for acting in order to bestow

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63 Arendt, The Human Condition, 142.
64 “I do not think, as is often maintained, that the concept of ideas was primarily a concept of standards and measures, nor that its origin was political.” Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 74-75.
upon the realm of human affairs the solidity inherent in work and fabrication becomes most apparent where it touches the very center of his philosophy, the doctrine of ideas. When Plato was not concerned with political philosophy (as in the Symposium and elsewhere), he describes the ideas as what "shines forth most" (ekphanestaton) and therefore as variations of the beautiful. Only in the Republic were the ideas transformed into standards, measurements, and rules of behavior, all of which are variations or derivations of the idea of the "good" in the Greek sense of the word, that is, of the "good for" or of fitness. This transformation was necessary to apply the doctrine of ideas to politics, and it is essentially for a political purpose, the purpose of eliminating the character of frailty from human affairs, that Plato found it necessary to declare the good, and not the beautiful, to be the highest idea.65

Through applying such standards and measures, then, the philosophers aimed to regulate and regularize the political realm—to place it in its rightful position, under the rule of the eternal. The newly diminished ideas of the good thus served as a patterns for producing, for fabricating, a more stable and reliable polis—a polis structured around fixed and repeatable constructs. Accordingly, “Plato and Aristotle elevated lawmaking and city-building to the highest rank in political life.”66 In raising these poietical, artisanal forms above the rank of action, Plato and Aristotle endeavored to evade the worldly vexations of a politics grounded in praxis. In so doing, they likewise redefined the very meaning of action and with it, the meaning of the vita activa.

65 Arendt, The Human Condition, 225-226. See also “Philosophy and Politics,” 77: “The difference between the good and the beautiful, not only to us but even more so to the Greeks, is that the good can be applied and has an element of use in itself. Only if the realm of ideas is illuminated by the idea of the good could Plato use the ideas for political purposes and, in the Laws, erect his ideocracy, in which eternal ideas were translated into human laws.”

66 Arendt, The Human Condition, 195, emphasis added.
In reconstituting the political as a productive art or craft, the philosophers, in the same stroke, produced the need for a craftsman—for someone to apply the model of the ideas to the substance of the polis being constructed. To fill this need, they turned to an ambiguity in the original Greek conception of action. According to Arendt, both “Greek and Latin, unlike the modern languages, contain two altogether different and yet interrelated words with which to designate the verb ‘to act.’”\(^67\) The Greek version of these terms consists of “archein (‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ finally ‘to rule’) and prattein (‘to pass through,’ ‘to achieve,’ ‘to finish’).”\(^68\) Arendt argues that through divorcing these two terms, Plato was able to separate rule from execution and to thereby escape the unpredictable perils of action qua praxis. In praxis, as we have seen, beginning and execution are of a piece—two aspects of the self-same performance. By driving a wedge between them, Plato was able to separate the ‘beginner’ cum ruler from the ruled and to thereby redefine the entire logic of the polis.

Theoretically, the most brief and most fundamental version of the escape from action into rule occurs in the Statesman, where Plato opens a gulf between the two modes of action, archein and prattein ("beginning" and "achieving"), which according to Greek understanding were interconnected. The problem, as Plato saw it, was to make sure that the beginner would remain the complete master of what he had begun, not needing the help of others to carry it through. In the realm of action, this isolated mastership can be achieved only if the others are no longer needed to join the enterprise of their own accord, with their own motives and aims, but

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\(^67\) Arendt, The Human Condition, 189.
\(^68\) Ibid.
are used to execute orders, and if, on the other hand, the beginner who took the initiative does not permit himself to get involved in the action itself. To begin (archein) and to act (prattein) thus can become two altogether different activities, and the beginner has become a ruler (an archon in the twofold sense of the word) who "does not have to act at all (prattein), but rules (archein) over those who are capable of execution."69

With the separation of ruler from the ruled, then, the polis was no longer a site of action, in the sense of praxis; it was, in other words, no longer an organic whole in which individuals both shaped and were shaped by the very performance of public life. On the contrary, the ruler, separated out from the body of the ruled, was no longer in any way affected by the polis. He was the shaper of the polis, its craftsman; he was not in turn shaped by it. Indeed, it was only through such separation that the craftsman could preserve the eminent integrity of his position. Only, that is, insofar as he was unchanged by the changes that he set in motion could the ruler remain unaffectedly the same and thus consistent in his application of the rules. The ruled, on the other hand, were entirely removed from the process of setting things in motion; their task was simply to carry out the rules, instrumentally, as a means to an end. Their action—indeed action writ large after its divorce from 'beginning'—was thereby reduced to a matter of mere means. The ruled, then, were diminished to mere instruments, entirely at the disposal of the master or craftsman; as such, they were no different from the household slaves noted above with reference to Aristotle’s Politics.

69 Arendt, The Human Condition, 222-223.
The philosophical withdrawal of action from the domain of politics thus likewise coincided with the occlusion of the political itself. Framed within the household terms of the ruler and the ruled, the *polis* became firmly inscribed within what had been its defining antithesis, the *oikos*.

Since Plato himself immediately identified the dividing line between thought and action with the gulf which separates the rulers from those over whom they rule, it is obvious that the experiences on which the Platonic division rests are those of the household. . . . Plato was still quite aware that he proposed a revolutionary transformation of the *polis* when he applied to its administration the currently recognized maxims for a well-ordered household. (It is a common error to interpret Plato as though he wanted to abolish the family and the household; he wanted, on the contrary, to extend this type of life until one family embraced every citizen....) According to Greek understanding, the relationship between ruling and being ruled, between command and obedience, was by definition identical with the relationship between master and slaves and therefore precluded all possibility of action. Plato’s contention, therefore, that the rules of behavior in public matters should be derived from the master-slave relationship in a well-ordered household actually meant that action should not play any part in human affairs.\(^{70}\)

The philosophical eschewal of the unpredictability of action thus lead to a reconstitution of the political in what had for Greeks been the pre-political, even “barbaric,” terms of the *oikos*. As noted above, it was precisely the possibility of leaving the domain of rule, of necessity and compulsion, behind that had characterized entering into the public space of the *polis*. What distinguished the *polis* from the *oikos* and “the barbarian empires of Asia” was that here, compulsion and force had no place—here, only the free interchange of equals had dominion.

redefining the political in terms of the *oikos*, then, Plato restored the pre-political violence that, for Arendt as well as for the Ancient Greeks, was the very hallmark of separating rule from the ruled. As we have seen, the reintroduction of such violence was purposive in its aim to stem the unruliness of power as *praxis*. In a political domain in which power was inseparable from the capacity of each citizen to act, in the full sense, the insuperable plurality made any political outcome wholly unpredictable. The introduction of monachism—of singular, unified rule from above—was thus meant to stem this tide of plurality and to thereby grant stability and constancy to the *polis*. The cost of such stability, however, was to be the political itself—power was to be replaced with violence, the *polis* with an extended *oikos*.

Reframed in the terms of an extended household, the newly constructed political *philosophy* became centered on a form of housekeeping. Insofar as plurality, with all of its attendant unruliness, was excised from the *polis*, so too was

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71 That this form of violence became central to Western conceptions of the political is one of the key motivating factors behind Arendt’s return to Ancient Greek conceptions of the *polis*. Amongst those thinkers that Arendt singles out for relying on such violence are Weber, for whom the “state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory”; Bodin, whose claims about absolute sovereignty insist upon the sovereign’s right to rule without in any way being ruled; and Hobbes, whose similar notion of absolute sovereignty arose from and was indeed legitimized by the broader violence that it was believed to have stemmed from (i.e., the war of all against all in the state of nature). In this vein, it is likewise worth noting that even the ostensibly more liberal political thinker, John Locke, likewise placed violence at the center of his conception of political power in *Two Treatises on Government*: “Political power, then, I take to be a RIGHT of making laws with penalties of death, and consequently all less penalties.” For more on Arendt’s attempt to promulgate her *praxis-centric* conception of power over the more traditional importance of violence, see *On Violence*. 
the uniqueness of its citizens. The *polis*, then, could no longer be focused on the truly human individuality of its citizens, nor on the common world that emerged from their unpredictable interaction. Only that which was held in common, independent of the unforeseeable accidents of individuality, could be fully predicted and provided for. Accordingly, the common was reduced to what was held in common by citizens, not as unique individuals, but as members of the species. The anonymous, biological province of the *oikos* thus came to pervade the philosophical re-rendering of the *polis*. This treatment of the citizens in their biological commonality corresponded precisely to Plato’s conception of the *polis* as a headless and naturally heedless body. According to Arendt, Plato conceived of the *polis* as a sort of macrocosmic analog of the philosopher himself. Just as the philosopher requires his body in order to support the more ephemeral concerns of his soul, so too do philosophers in general require the world of men in order to enable their more contemplative ends. Accordingly, in order to pursue these ends, the body and its larger analog, the *polis*, needed to be preserved but likewise needed to be reined in such that they would not interfere in the more material matters of immateriality. The capacity to reign with such discipline, then, was for Plato, the very hallmark of the qualification to rule—only, that is, one capable of disciplined stewardship of his own organic needs was considered capable of ruling the larger organism of the *polis*. Ironically, it was in this way that Plato took the lessons of the Greek *polis*—namely that necessity needed to be well in hand prior to participation in public life—in order
to invert the very logic of the oikos and the polis—in order, that is, to place the private domain of contemplation above the newly constituted public domain of necessity.

For Arendt, this inversion—arising out of the conflict between philosophy and politics—has come to characterize the entirety of political thought in the West. Politics, that is, has come to serve as a housemaid for other, non-worldly concerns. Though only schematically, she gestures toward two primary privative matters that in turn took the place of philosophy as the protected end of the political. The first of these, Christianity, followed quite naturally from the philosophical—along the well-known lines that connected classical philosophy to theology through such thinkers as Augustine. According to Arendt, after the fall of the Roman res publica, the notion of worldly stability was firmly shaken, providing an essential opening to the emergent other-worldliness of Christianity. The political form that most corresponded to this privative domain was feudalism—a political form that was confined to the households of feudal lords and that, accordingly, lacked almost any public dimension. Arendt does, however, note one distinction between feudal and ancient households—a distinction that indicates the inclusion of the “political” within the domain of the feudal oikos. “[T]he feudal lord,” she writes, “could render justice within the limits of his rule, whereas the ancient household head, while he might exert a milder or harsher rule, knew neither of laws nor justice outside the
political realm.”\textsuperscript{72} On the heals of feudalism, the rise of private wealth brought the other non-public and consequently, non-worldly correlate to the political.

Though certainly more material than the Christian concern with eternity, wealth, for Arendt, is likewise unworldly. Unlike property—which in the classical world secured one a place in the \textit{polis} by showing that one belonged to, i.e., had a proper place within and was therefore a part of a city—Arendt defines wealth as a purely privative matter—as something meant to be used and held onto exclusively within the private domain. Politics in the service of wealth, then, showed up when its possessors, “instead of claiming access to the public realm because of their wealth, demanded protection from it for the accumulation of more wealth.”\textsuperscript{73}

Originally, this privative politics emerged in the still monarchical form of the commonwealth. Here, that is, the public realm was still ruled over by a singular leader, but this leader was in turn governed by the private interests of the common wealth. Arendt underscores this point both through reference to Bodin as well as through a laudatory citation from an essay by R. W. K. Hinton.\textsuperscript{74} In his essay, “Was Charles I a Tyrant?,” Hinton suggests that Charles I was rightfully found guilty of tyranny due to his violation of the private wealth of his subjects. In effect, and through his own work on Bodin, Hinton argues that Charles I acted toward his subjects as a conqueror in his own land—in a land, moreover, already settled under

\textsuperscript{72} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 34.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
the dominion of law and thus unavailable to internal conquest. Though Charles I was the lawful king of England, his failure to account for the way in which the public, political good was held to be in the service of private interests allowed him to act unlawfully. For Arendt, then, it is understandable, albeit deeply ironic, that what brings renewed interest in participation in public life is not interest in participating in the public realm but, on the contrary, the desire to protect private interests from an unreliable government. In “What is Freedom” (and again, notably, with reference to Charles I), she writes:

the people's "liberty and freedom consisted in having the government of those laws by which their life and their goods may be most their own: 'tis not for having share in government, that is nothing pertaining to them" as Charles I summed it up in his speech from the scaffold. It was not out of a desire for freedom that people eventually demanded their share in government or admission to the political realm, but out of mistrust in those who held power over their life and goods.  

Driven out of private interest, then, it is by no means surprising that popular participation in government by no means led to the production of a public sphere.

What emerged, instead, is what Arendt refers to as the social realm. The social realm, which has its roots in the rise of the commonwealth, is the fully hybridized domain in which “both the public and private spheres of life are gone, the public because it has become a function of the private and the private because it has

75 Arendt, “What is Freedom?”, 150.
become the only common concern left.”\textsuperscript{76} According to Arendt, the distortion inherent in the “political” logic of the social can be tracked through the Latinized mistranslation of Aristotle’s \textit{zoon politikon} as \textit{animal socialis}.\textsuperscript{77} The problem with this translation was that the social was understood as a functional grouping driven by a practical end. For the ancient Greeks, however, such groupings were considered common even amongst the animals who lived in herds in order to insure their mutual survival. Such groupings, then, entirely missed the non-instrumental and thus truly human dimension of the political. Accordingly, the permeation of this socialized notion across the Latinized West abetted a firmly instrumental conception of the political organized around tending to the needs of \textit{society} as a whole—as the unified household of the nascent nation-state. While at first these needs were tended to by the protective hand of the monarch, when, as we have seen, this hand came to be perceived as being at odds with the needs of society—indeed as a threat to society—it came to be replaced by what Arendt refers to as “the most social form of government, that is, \ldots \textit{bureaucracy}.”\textsuperscript{78}

Born out of the abdication of any specific ruler, “the [bureaucratic] rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its crudest and most tyrannical versions.”\textsuperscript{79} Indeed, as Arendt writes elsewhere:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{76} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 69.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 23.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 40.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
If, in accord with traditional political thought, we identify tyranny as government that is not held to give account of itself, rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is being done.\textsuperscript{80}

While in a monarchical state, there was always at least one person who remained within the public realm, in bureaucracy, there is no one. This absolute anonymity points toward a decisive turn, indeed, re-turn. While the poi\textit{et}ic form of the political initiated by Plato and carried forward by the various feudal and monarchical households required a master of the house—a craftsman to guide the production and operation of the \textit{polis}—the new bureaucratic form was entirely hands-off. Just as Arendt argues that industrial production blurs the boundary between work and labor, so too does bureaucracy blur the boundary between \textit{poiesis} and nature. With regard to the former, Arendt contends that industrial manufacturing tends toward the production of goods aimed at consumption, not at durability. Accordingly, such goods are less part of the \textit{world} than of the life process that silently subtends it.

Similarly, with respect to bureaucracy, the rules that govern appear given over to nature—appear, that is, to emerge from nowhere, naturally, on their own. Unlike the unruly \textit{polis}, however, such rules remain in force—they command compliance, but do so almost invisibly. Rather than working through the firm hand of the craftsman, then, such rules operate through an “invisible hand”—through the (bio-\textit{feedback} loop that is the new law of the social home, modern economics. While on

\textsuperscript{80} Arendt, \textit{On Violence}, 76.
one side, Arendt argues that the law of large numbers tends to compel conformity amongst members of a large population—members who could only appear as such through their mutual identification as belonging to the same social unit; on the other, the bureaucratic structure administering such a population does so precisely through the statistical accounting of its broad, and therefore generic, trends. Such administration, in other words, shapes its policies precisely by ruling out the exceptional and the unique. Clearly, then, such administration would be given over to rewarding behavior—to rewarding conformity to the generic patterns of its extended household.

It is in this way that Arendt argues that behavior comes to replace action as the primary modality of the political. In a dramatic reversal of the polis, under the dominion of society one is no longer able to appear in public in one’s uniqueness and individuality, in one’s true humanity. On the contrary, one is compelled to conform—to disappear beneath the anonymity of seriality; beneath the faceless calculation of endless streams of numbers. In effect, then, the oikos that was given over to nature is transformed into the second order nature of economics. As this second nature has metastatically taken over what had been the public world, it consequently offers no public space through which to escape its anonymity. According to Arendt, the only place left for such escape—for showing up as oneself, in one’s uniqueness and individuality—is within the confines of intimacy. The intimate, which Arendt defines as the private analog of public society, is even more
limited than the classical *oikos*. Insofar as within the social the functions of the *oikos* have become public, the intimate is reduced to a mere shelter from administrative conformity; only within its confines, amongst one’s intimates, can one be truly *at home* enough to be oneself. Accordingly, one’s self is deeply diminished—constrained from appearing within the “objective” reality of the public world, it is confined to a deeply subjective and privative interiority.

Through the wholesale economization of the political, then, the world disappears and so too do its inhabitants. No longer is freedom defined as one’s capacity to begin something new and to thereby publicly demonstrate one’s uniqueness and humanity. To the contrary, with the rise of the social, freedom is redefined negatively as freedom *from* the political—as freedom from the anonymous conformity of administered public space. Through her archeological uncovering of the *polis*, then, Arendt is aiming squarely at trying to stem the metastatic tide of the society’s second-order nature.
Chapter 2: Foucault

Passe-moi le sel, je te donne le poivre.81

If in substantial ways Arendt’s work in *The Human Condition* can be read as tracing the arc of the metastasis of the economic—from its originary confines within the *oikos* to its takeover of public life in the social—Foucault’s lectures of 1977-79 at the Collège de France can be seen as tracing a complimentary arc—one which circles back from the social into the most intimate privacy of all, into the very formation of the self. With these lectures, that is, Foucault’s analysis begins with a public sphere that is already well-ensconced within what Arendt refers to as the social realm. Starting with the early-modern emergence of the logic of the state—a logic centered around the extended household of the sovereign, Foucault follows the development of this socially construed politics through to their culmination in modern, political economics. It is with this latter formation that Foucault is then able to show the manner in which a fully *public* form of economics comes not only to govern the state—to form the very logic of state governance, and hence of politics—but

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81 Foucault, *Naissance de la Biopolitique*, 251.
Likewise circles back into the oikos itself—transforming it into an instrument, an incubator, for the very production of economic subjectivity. With Foucault, then, we can come to see how an economics which had already dominated the logic of the public sphere returns to the oikos from which it had emerged. From this vantage, then, we will likewise be granted much greater purchase on the mechanics of behavior with which Arendt left us; we will, that is, be able to see how a macro-economics of public government serves to inform the micro-political, self-governance of its individual subjects.

According to Foucault, the logic of the modern state, raison d’Etat, began to take shape after the collapse of the universalisms that dominated the medieval political landscape of Europe. Foremost amongst these universalisms was, of course, both the doctrine and authority of the Catholic Church. Under the Catholic paradigm, the sovereign states of Europe, though granted some province with respect to their terrestrial concerns, were largely inscribed within a theological worldview. For medieval European sovereigns, that is, both the origins and ends of their legitimacy were firmly bound up with G-d—from whom their power descended and to whom the responsible exercise of that power was ultimately directed. In terms of the politics of the time, this religious underpinning shaded the conflicts between various kingdoms as something on the order of what Foucault refers to as

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“dynastic rivalries.” Under the auspices of the eschatologically guaranteed unity of Christendom, these rivalries played out with dynastic princes vying for priority in what would ultimately be the universal Empire.

The time of the Middle Ages was still one that, at a certain moment, had to become unified as the universal time of an Empire in which all differences would be effaced, and this universal Empire would herald and be the theater of Christ’s return. The Empire, the last Empire, the universal Empire, whether of the Caesars or of the Church, was something that haunted the medieval perspective, and to that extent there was no indefinite government. There was no state or kingdom destined to indefinite government.

Bound by the inexorable fatality of eschatological time, in other words, medieval states were never conceived as anything more than temporary. What mattered in this delimited horizon, then, were not states themselves but simply the relative position of the various princes within the broader field of the Empire to come.

Accordingly, without any intrinsic significance, there was no need for a logic of the state—such logic, then, could only emerge after the end of temporal finitude.

With the Protestant Reformation, clearly such unified visions of the Empire to come were radically upended. Not only was there no longer a single, universal Church, but religious wars between the various states of Europe made the notion of Imperial unity even harder to conceive. For Foucault, then, the treaty that put an end to this religious strife, the Treaty of Westphalia, likewise put an end to the dreams of a final Empire. “The end of the Roman Empire should be situated exactly

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84 Ibid., 260.
in [1648], that is to say, when [it] is finally recognized that the Empire is not the ultimate vocation of states, when it is no longer the form into which it is hoped or dreamed that states will one day merge.” 85 With the Treaty of Westphalia, then, “[t]he plurality of states [ceased to be conceived as] a transitional phase imposed on men for a time and as a punishment.” 86 Plurality, in other words, became the operative reality of states; they could no longer be regarded as mere stepping-stones to a more unified future. Moreover, dislodged from the dream of an ultimate unity, states could no longer be folded into eschatologically bounded time. On the contrary, the institutionalization of plurality opened up an entirely new temporal horizon for states—an “indefinite” horizon, one literally stripped of finitude or end. States, then, could no longer be dismissed as fleeting or temporary. Ultimately, then, states came to be conceived as of indefinite duration and as substantially independent of any larger totality; they came, in other words, to be conceived in their own terms, as independent and durable entities.

It is out of this new conceptualization that the modern logic of the state, or *raison d’Etat*, was born. No longer folded into the broader theo-logic of a unified Christendom, states had to be newly grounded in their own terms. The new “theorists of *raison d’Etat* defined the state as always being its own end. The state is

85 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 291, brackets in the original citation—the first bracket corrects an error in the original manuscript which contained the date, 1647.
86 Ibid., 290.
organized only by reference to itself.”\textsuperscript{87} Carved into self-standing entities, states, that is, had to develop their own internal resources, their own internal logics for justifying and substantiating themselves. No longer bit players upon a larger stage, states had to discover within themselves their own raison d’être. The reason that came of these reflections, of this domestic introspection, indeed hinged on être, on being, as the cornerstone of raison d’État. Referring only to themselves, the foremost responsibility of states was to preserve themselves—to guarantee their integrity and, beyond that, to insure their own continued flourishing. According to Palazzo, as cited in Foucault, raison d’État was conceived as “a rule or art (…) which makes known the means for obtaining the integrity, tranquility, or peace of the republic.”\textsuperscript{88} Further, calling on Chemnitz to hammer the point home, Foucault writes that raison d’État is “a certain political consideration that is necessary in all public matters, councils and plans, which must strive solely for the preservation, expansion and felicity of the state, and for which we must employ the most ready and swift means.”\textsuperscript{89} Divorced from any broader unity and given over to an indefinite and open-ended future, it thus fell upon states, as their paramount duty, to tend to their own continued existence. Accordingly, entities that had once been conceived of as transitory and insignificant, now came to serve as the very center of geopolitical thought. Diametrically distant from their transitory past, states were now tasked

\textsuperscript{87} Foucault, Security, Territory, Population, 290.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 257, ellipsis in original.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
precisely with preserving their self-standing, with preserving their independence. And though such independence was clearly a matter of internal self-reference, preserving such independence equally clearly required defense against external incursions and pressures. The inward turn of independent states thus likewise fostered a transformation of external relations—a reciprocal transformation through which states were brought together through their very efforts to remain apart and distinct.

The corollary to the dissolution of the Empire sealed by the Treaty of Westphalia, then, was a new set of relations between the collectively disaggregated European states. According to Foucault, the aim of these relations was what he refers to as the “European Balance.” The intent behind the “European Balance” was to guarantee the independence of individual states by preventing any one state from imposing its will upon any other and thereby establishing a broader form of terrestrial imperium. ⁹⁰ Again, in the collapse of the eschatologically-inspired imperial vision of Europe, the dominion of independent states became paramount. Toward this end, international borders had to be protected and preserved through diplomatic and military apparatuses that fostered coalitions of various large and small states against any state that endeavored to overstep its bounds. In order to provide for their own integrity, states were thus bound to each other as a means of countering any threat to the internal balance of European power. They were bound,

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that is, to bind, to mutually delimit one another within the confines of their treaty-bound borders. Through the “European Balance,” then, states were secured through their mutual limitation.  

Though confined along their borders, states were still able to expand internally. Indeed, states were driven to such expansion precisely through the requirements of maintaining balance. The only way for balance to be preserved was for states to endeavor to keep up with each other. Even with coalitions, that is, states needed to be able to marshal the necessary resources to maintain the military and diplomatic apparatuses that were at the heart of the “European Balance.” States with increasing wealth and population would be increasingly difficult to counterbalance without commensurate increases amongst their rival states. In this way, the “European Balance,” which in turn rested upon the self-preservation of states, fostered an interminable, “indefinite,” competition amongst states.

According to Foucault, such competition added another layer upon *raison d’Etat*. Insofar as states could only preserve themselves by countering others, the competitive differentials between states came to be read in terms of force—in terms of the comparative forces between states locked in competition. Accordingly, states, in their own, intrinsic terms, came to be regarded under a new analytics of

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91 Such confinement, of course, was only operative within the territorial domain of continental Europe. Though Foucault does briefly mention the broader, global imperialism of European states, his focus in these lectures is the development of the internal logic of government within Europe itself.
States, that is, came to viewed with respect to their internal resources and potentialities. Developing these resources to their foremost thus became part of the art of rule that was raison d’Etat. Particularly in light of their external delimitation, internal development became a priority for European states and indeed served as the primary index of their growth. While externally, then, a military-diplomatic apparatus served to preserve the territorial balance between states—to keep them hemmed in—internally a corollary apparatus was developed to enrich and cultivate state resources—to press advantages or, at very least, keep competitive with a state’s relative peers. This second, internal apparatus was the police.

According to Foucault, the police of the seventeenth century did not serve in a judicial capacity. They did not operate on justice, nor in terms of justice; they did not, that is, operate in terms of legal structures or laws which were effectuated only through transgression—through the obligation of the police to bring to justice those who were accused of breaking the law.

[F]rom the beginning of the seventeenth century the idea of a police power will be clearly distinguished from a different type of exercise of royal power, which is the power of justice, judicial power. . . . At this time, police is in no way thought of as a sort of instrument in the hands of judicial power, as a sort of way of applying regular justice. It is not an extension of justice, it is not the king acting through his apparatus of justice; it is the king acting directly on his subjects, but in a non-judicial form.93

93 Ibid., 339.
This non-judicial form operated in terms of regulation rather than laws. The police, that is, served to apply the power of the king to his subjects through the perpetual intervention into the very forms and patterns of their behavior. Though still an extension of royal authority, this mode of intervention diverged from the juridico-legal form in that it did not operate through an extrinsic framework of prohibitions and restrictions—compelling compliance by punishing the failure to comply. On the contrary, this mode operated through the detailed engagement of the police in the very substance of subjects’ everyday lives. Far from a merely restrictive presence, that is, the police were a productive mechanism, conducting behavior through promoting optimal modes of action and interaction amongst a state’s subjects. The police, in other words, were a disciplinary apparatus—an apparatus which served to train and condition a king’s subjects toward the end of enhancing the resources of the state.

What, then, are the concrete tasks of the police? As its instrument, it will have to provide itself with whatever is necessary and sufficient for effectively integrating men’s activity into the state, into its forces, and into the development of these forces, and it will have to ensure that the state, in turn, can stimulate, determine and orient this activity in such a way that it is in fact useful to the state.

Amid the agonistic field of interstate competition, the police thus served to increase the forces of the state, by harnessing and mobilizing its subjects. Though Foucault does not take much time with the means of this mobilization, he does briefly

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95 Ibid., 323.
indicate the general objects with which the police were concerned. First and foremost, he says, the police were concerned with the number of subjects within the state. Clearly, the number of subjects in a state would substantially determine both its productive capacity and its ability to raise an army. Foucault, however, is careful to note that such numbers are not absolute but must be calculated in terms of the size and available natural resources of a state. This concern with natural resources points toward the second object of police concern, alimentation. In order to support a substantial population, a state would clearly need to be able to feed its people. Accordingly, the police were involved in such matters as agricultural policy. Related to sustenance, police were likewise engaged with issues of health. Beyond simply intervening in times of epidemic, Foucault suggests that the police were likewise involved in the sorts of urban planning that would effect ventilation and water supply and thereby stave off the dangers of contagion, understood at the time in terms of ‘miasmas.’ Reciprocally bound up with provisioning and health, the police were likewise concerned with the occupation of their healthful and adequately provisioned subjects. At minimum, the police had to insure that the various professions were staffed well enough to support the needs of the state, including providing for the needs of those who were not able to care for themselves. The final object of policely concern remarked by Foucault is circulation—circulation both in terms of people and goods. Here the objective was to facilitate the productive movement of goods, materials and workers while at the same time
constraining vagrancy and the loss of necessary workers. Partly, then, this object centered on the management of roads and waterways; partly on the inducement and discouragement of certain migrations.\(^96\)

In general, then, the police of the seventeenth century worked upon and cultivated the subjects of the state. Theirs was an economic task in the broadest sense of managing the kingly household of the state. Indeed, as Foucault notes, the very model of their power was the family, the household or \textit{oikos}. The job of the police was to transmit the royal authority of the king directly onto his subjects such that he could rule over them like a father ruled over his family. In return for their father’s tending to their well-being, the subjects of the state were to remain obedient, docile and available to his instruction. Such instruction, after all, was for their own good—for the good of the family, for the good of the state.

In any case, you can see that the essential component, the central element in this continuity, both in the Prince’s education and in the police, is the government of family, which is called precisely “economy.” The art of government essentially appears in this literature as having to answer the question of how to introduce economy—that is, the proper way of managing individuals, goods and wealth, like the management of a family by a father who knows how to direct his wife, his children, and his servants, who knows how to make his family’s fortune prosper, and how to arrange suitable alliances for it—how to introduce this meticulous attention, this type of relationship between father and the family, into the management of the state? The essential issue of government will be the introduction of economy into the state.\(^97\)

\(^{97}\) Ibid., 95.
The police thus served as the economic right-hand of the king. Outside of any judicial capacity, their task was to *meticulously attend* to the subjects of the state—to manage and mold them according to the fatherly mandates of the king. This was their broadly economic role.

This broader role was both informed by *and* overlapped with a more narrowly defined form of economics. As noted above, the inspiration for the general economic management of the state was European interstate competition. Insofar as each state was hemmed in by every other, the only dimension of growth provided to states was the internal development of their domestic resources. Accordingly, such development was the primary index for the competition between states and, indeed, served as the governing principle for the very form of this competition—for the form known as mercantilism.

> [P]olice, the establishment of police, is absolutely inseparable from a governmental theory and practice that is generally labeled mercantilism . . . . Mercantilism . . . identifies commerce as the essential instrument and fundamental weapon in this intra-European competition that must take place in the form of equilibrium. That is to say, mercantilism requires, first, that every country try to have the largest possible population, second, that the entire population be put to work, third, that the wages given to the population be as low as possible so that, fourth, the cost price of goods is the lowest possible and one can thus sell the maximum amount abroad, which will bring about the import of gold, the transfer of gold into the royal treasury, or in any case, in this way the country will triumph commercially.\(^\text{98}\)

As is well known, mercantilism operated as a sort of zero sum game, with each state vying to increase its overall share of the limited supply of gold precisely at the

expense of every other state. It was toward this end, that the disciplinary
management of the state’s subjects by the police was deployed. The police’s broadly
economic management of the state—their “meticulous attention” to the lives and
livelihoods of the state’s subjects—thus folded neatly into the more narrowly
economic terms that governed interstate competition. That these twined economic
procedures failed, in their own terms, is something that Foucault illuminates
through a brief analysis of mercantile policies with regard to grain.

In terms of the broader economic management of the state, grain, as a
resource, needed to be controlled in order to guarantee the ability of the state to
support its population. The management of grain was thus necessary as a means of
staving off scarcity and the attendant scourge of malnutrition. In narrower economic
terms, keeping the cost of grain as cheap as possible would likewise keep the cost of
living and hence the cost of labor as cheap as possible. In turn, cheap labor would
guarantee the lowest possible price for the manufacture of goods which would then
have a competitive advantage in terms of international trade and could thus be
readily exported, serving the ultimate aim of bringing additional gold into the state’s
coffers. The management of grain was thus of central importance in both economic
registers. In order to keep grain cheap and abundant, the police undertook a series
of measures including prohibiting the export of grain, insisting upon the cultivation
of grain instead of others crops, and prohibiting the hording and excessive storage of
grain. According to Foucault, however, these measures intended to stave off scarcity
and keep the price of grain low were doomed to failure. Insofar as the price of grain was constrained, the profits of peasants were low and, particularly in times of great abundance, could actually fall into negative territory. Accordingly, these low profits or deficits would negatively impact peasants ability to cultivate grain; dwindling returns, that is, would clearly limit the resources available to them for sowing in the subsequent seasons. Reduced cultivation then, particularly when coupled with periodically poor climatic conditions, would and indeed did lead precisely to the scarcity and expense that the economic management of grain had endeavored to avoid.99

Beyond these patently economic dimensions, the economic management of the state likewise had significant political costs. As the principle index of growth, the internal development of the state became a sort of limitless counterpoint to the external delimitation of states. As we have seen, insofar as states were mutually constricted from without, internal growth became their primary means of increase. Accordingly, the policing, or broadly economic management of the state, became increasingly refined and articulated—increasingly developed in concert with the demands of competition and with the increasing development of the resources of the state. Confined within their borders, the powers of the state were thus reflected inward, parabolically. In effect, external limitation, and the field of forces that supported it, fostered the unlimited internal development of the powers of the

state. Development begat development; disciplinary intervention, its manifold increase. With the enrichment of the state, then, so too came the increasing suffocation of its people. According to Foucault, it was for this reason that new legal challenges to the authority of royal power, such as the theory of natural law, began to be pursued.\textsuperscript{100} The proponents of natural law sought a means of limiting the power of the state via recourse to a juridical form that exceeded the very authority of the state. Insofar as raison d’Etat centered squarely on the state from which and to which it circled, natural law theorists aimed to broach this circle by stipulating a form of right that preceded and hence exceeded the dominion of the state. Natural right was G-d-given and to that extent trumped the very jurisdiction of the state. Such right, then, was framed as a means of drawing an internal border within the state itself—a domestic border which the state could not lawfully exceed. Politically, then, raison d’Etat and the economic management through which it governed, fostered forms of resistance that threatened to explode the very circle of its reason. If raison d’Etat were not to be subverted by its own governing mechanisms, then a new form of governing would have to be found—one which could succeed both economically and politically.

The new form of governing, or “governmentality,” that grew out of the political and economic failings of the mercantilist police state, radically restructured the very logic of government; indeed, such restructuring is central to the

\textsuperscript{100} Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 8-9.
Foucauldian concept of governmentality. By governmentality, Foucault aims to articulate the inextricable links between a given conceptual understanding of the objects of government, i.e., its *mentality*, and the means or institutions through which these objects are ruled or governed. Clearly the manner in which a sovereign power regards its state—the “grid of intelligibility” through which it perceives the state—will determine the means, the institutional mechanisms, through which it will govern. As we have seen, for instance, the conceptual model for the mercantilist state was that of the family, or *oikos*. Accordingly, royal authority was deployed in an ardently paternalistic fashion through the firmly hands-on disciplinary institution of the police. The disciplinary operation of the police points toward another Foucauldian complexity internal to the logic of governing itself. For Foucault, governing is not restricted to abstract, legal rule; indeed, it is not restricted to rule, in the political sense, at all. On the contrary, government refers to the broad array of practices through which conduct itself is conducted.\(^{101}\) As Thomas Lemke succinctly puts it:

> In addition to control/management by the state or the administration, ‘government’ also signified problems of self-control, guidance for the family and for children, management of the household, directing the soul, etc. For this reason, Foucault defines government as . . . a term which ranges from ‘governing the self ’ to ‘governing others’.\(^{102}\)


In terms of the mercantilist state, this range formed both an ascending and descending continuum.¹⁰³ On the ascending ladder, it was maintained that one must first be able to govern oneself, to exercise proper self-control, prior to being able to govern a family. Likewise, the good governance of the family served as a prerequisite for state government. On the descending trajectory, this logic was reversed such that the sovereign, in governing the state, likewise maintained the authority to govern families or social groupings as well as individuals within the state. The sovereign, that is, maintained the right to conduct the modes of conduct within the state down to the atomic level of his individual subjects—a right, of course, which he exercised through the mediating instrument of the police. The failure of this overly narrow, disciplinary mode of governance thus gave rise to the development of a new mode of conduction or governing—a mode which in turn rested on an entirely different conceptual model, or mentality.

According to Foucault, the model that inherited the position previously held by the family was population.¹⁰⁴ Though no longer centered on the oikos, population was a deeply economic model; indeed, as a conceptual model, population rose to the fore under the analytic gaze of those to whom Foucault refers as the économistes. The économistes took up the same data comprising the knowledge of the state, or “statistics,” as had the police before them, but saw these data in an

¹⁰³ Foucault, Security, Territory, Population, 94.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 104.
entirely different light. Rather, that is, than using these data as direct indices of action needing to be taken—for instance, seeing an insufficient supply of grain as marching orders for compelling the substitution of vineyards by additional wheat fields—the économistes examined statistics with an eye to understanding the natural patterns that these numbers revealed. The économistes, in other words, saw statistics as raw, empirical data—data which could be plumbed in order to discover the laws operative within the very flow of resources themselves. For the économistes, that is, the circulation of state resources, or economy, operated according to its own internal laws—laws which, like nature or physis, could be understood and predicted. Accordingly, the économistes (who, incidentally, were know in France as the physiocrats) thought of economics as a sort of physics.\(^{105}\) By analyzing the data arising from the population—rates of productivity, reproduction, health and sickness, criminality, etc.—the économistes aimed to discover the natural laws of the economy. Unlike the family, then, population did not simply serve as a docile and malleable model, open to ready and endless manipulation. On the contrary, population was an object of analysis—a scientific object of study; an object with its own internal densities and rules. This objective status, however, did not mean that population was beyond all manipulation. As with the other physicists of the eighteenth century, the économistes believed that by understanding the natural

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laws operating within the population, they could channel its forces in productive ways—in ways that maximized benefits and minimized deficits.

To say that population is a natural phenomenon that cannot be changed by decree does not mean, however, that it is an inaccessible and impenetrable nature, quite the contrary. And this is where the analysis of the physiocrats and economists becomes interesting, in that the naturalness identified in the fact of population is constantly accessible to agents and techniques of transformation, on condition that these agents and techniques are at once enlightened, reflected, analytical, calculated, and calculating.¹⁰⁶

The économistes thus had a very different mode of intervention than that of the police—a mode corresponding to their quite different conceptual object—a mode to which Foucault refers as security. Unlike the disciplinary modality of the police, the économistes did not start out with a preconceived model or form which they then sought to impose upon the populace, here in the guise of an extended family.¹⁰⁷ On the contrary, the économistes began by examining their object—population—in its own terms. Through such “enlightened” analysis, they aimed to discover the forces already operative within the population, naturally. Rather than juridically prohibiting or disciplinarily prescribing certain conduct—rather, that is, than juridically ordering “don’t do this” or disciplinarily commanding “do that”—security functioned by balancing the forces already extant within the population—by balancing these forces such that the more negative aspects of their nature were in effect canceled out. In other words, Foucault’s words, the apparatus of security

¹⁰⁶ Foucault, _Security, Territory, Population_, 71.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 63.
operated “in the form of a progressive self-cancellation of phenomena by the phenomena themselves.”\textsuperscript{108} Rather than attempting to impose order from the top down, security thus began on the ground, on the natural basis of what was already there. Here, then, there was no father commanding compliance—aiming to actively shape the population through a disciplinary hand. Here, on the contrary, were physicists working to understand the natural laws of the population—calculating and balancing the risks and tolerances bubbling up from within the population, always with an eye toward insuring its overall security. By studying and understanding these organic forces, these physicists, physiocrats or \textit{économistes} thus strove to work with nature rather than against it—to work with nature rather than plying their own external and consequently domineering designs. In this way, they believed that they could avoid the caustic fragility and ultimate failure of police interventions.

By way of illustrating this \textit{économiste} naturalism, Foucault turns once again to the question of scarcity surrounding grain policy.\textsuperscript{109} According to the \textit{économistes}, scarcity was a fiction, “‘a chimera’” brought about precisely through the heavy-handedness of police interventions.\textsuperscript{110} The only reason, they argued, that whole nations were simultaneously subject to shortages of grain was because the grain policies of these nations were controlled centrally and stridently in a monolithic fashion. Rather than trying to actively prevent scarcity by artificially restraining grain

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 36-42, 341-347.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 38.
prices, restricting the hording of grain and prohibiting its exportation, the
économistes prescribed more or less precisely the opposite. In the first place, they
argued that grain prices should be allowed to rise and indeed ought to be relatively
high. High prices would reward peasants for growing grain, granting them additional
resources for sowing their subsequent crops and incentivizing them to grow even
more grain. High prices, then, would serve to increase abundance. Such abundance
would, in turn, prevent prices from getting too high. In times of poor harvests, the
hording of grain—which would no longer be proscribed—would lead to higher
prices, but such prices would, in turn, be driven down by the attraction such prices
would have for exporters from foreign states—exporters who likewise no longer be
barred. Accordingly, prospective horders, not being able predict the amount of grain
that would subsequently be coming in from abroad, would not be incentivized to
hold onto grain that may indeed become cheaper. Without the artificial scarcity of
hording, then, abundance would naturally be higher. The international hording of
grain by countries hoping to exploit scarcity in another nation would similarly be
discouraged insofar as they would be unable to predict the potential exports of their
rival nations.

Ultimately, then, these “laissez-faire” policies of the économistes, aimed to
use the natural forces of markets to counter the problems of the scarcity and
dearness of grain. In order to allow these forces to operate, however, the économistes first had to understand them, to understand how the population would naturally respond to market conditions—how, for instance, a peasant would respond to higher prices for his produce or a merchant to the knowledge that markets were free and hence prices not entirely predictable. This analytic understanding—anchored in the conception of homo oeconomicus—in turn fostered policies that served to promote this natural conduct by allowing it to be rewarded, naturally, economically. Further along this natural path, rather than trying to prevent scarcity—attempting to artificially stamp it out—these new policies allowed scarcity to happen such that it would stimulate price increases which would in turn stimulate imports and thus drive both prices and scarcity down. Letting scarcity happen, in localized and discrete instances, was thus seen as the best way to prevent the more generalized, state-wide epidemic of scarcity; trying to prevent scarcity wholesale, to eradicate it in any and all instances, was, on the contrary, seen as the best way to insure its most catastrophic eruption. Here, then, we get a privileged example of the way the apparatus of security differs from that of discipline with respect to their particular objects. Unlike discipline, which aims to tighten its controls on all of the individuals within its grasp, security, operating on the population as a whole, takes a broader view. In this instance, then, rather than trying to control individuals, the apparatus of security was deployed to determine

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how a difficulty within a small segment of the population could actually be instrumental in stimulating a response that would provide protection against larger difficulties within the population as a whole. By calculating the salutary effects of such minor disturbances, security thus aimed at inoculating the broader population.\(^{112}\) In other words, by allowing small outbreaks, by letting them be, security aimed to use natural forces—stimuli and responses that would operate the population as a whole—as opposed to the more narrow and controlling atomic strictures of discipline to prevent calamities and to insure prosperity.

Apart from its narrowly economic benefits—for instance, the prevention of scarcity and dearness in staple goods—this new, *laissez-faire* technology likewise yielded political fruits. As noted above, part of the fragility of the police state stemmed from the perpetual, infinite refinement of its disciplinary apparatuses. The limitless development of internal state power fostered juridical challenges that sought to limit this power from the outside—via recourse to juridical domains external to the very structures of state power; via recourse to such domains as natural right. Such juridical challenges, then, were framed precisely, definitionally in terms extrinsic to the very logic of *raison d’Etat*. With the advent of *laissez-faire* governmentality, however, a new form of *nature* was discovered—a nature intrinsic to *raison d’Etat* and one which therefore, naturally, provided an internal limit to the

\(^{112}\) Indeed, in a similar register, Foucault uses the literal example of veriolization and vaccination against smallpox to demonstrate the new, security-based technology for managing the population. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 58-63.
power of the state. This new nature, which we have been discussing, was precisely the *physis* at the heart of the *économistes* new physics—the broadly economic nature operating within the extended organism of the population. Though the forces of this nature could be conducted, such intervention had to take into account and respect their natural laws. Such intervention, in other words, had to *let* these forces *be*; though their flows could be channeled, the internal dynamics of these flows could not be interfered with without risking the disastrous fragility of the previous disciplinary regime. The new nature of the *économistes* thus formed a new, natural boundary for *raison d'État*—an internal limit, written in its own terms and in line with its own objectives.\(^{113}\) The aim of *raison d'État*, after all, was the enrichment and growth of the state. Unlike the rigid, interventionist mechanisms of mercantilism, the logic of *laissez-faire* pursued this goal precisely by letting the economic laws internal to the population follow their own course, naturally. Under this new logic, then, it was seen as precisely in line with the interests of the state, with *raison d'État*, for the state to limit its interventions within the population. *Laissez-faire* governmentality thus gave rise to a new form of self-limitation for the state. This new form of limitation diverged from the appeal to natural right insofar as it was internal to the very logic of the state, to *raison d'État*, but such were not the only grounds of this divergence.

The appeal to natural right was a juridical appeal—one inscribed within the logic of legitimacy, of legal jurisdiction. In effect, the appeal to natural right challenged the state’s authority to transgress rights that were claimed to have preceded, and thus exceeded, the dominion of the state. At question, then, were a counterposed sets of rights: the right of the state to govern its subjects as it saw fit versus the right of subjects to a certain natural freedom that exceeded the authority of the state. According to Foucault, the governmental logic of *laissez-faire* shifted the entire terrain of this debate. The limits of government intervention were no longer a question of legitimacy, of authority or legal right; on the contrary, these limits were now written in terms of utility. “In other words,” Foucault writes, “there will be either success or failure; success or failure, rather than legitimacy or illegitimacy, now become the criteria of governmental action.”¹¹⁴ The metric for evaluating such success or failure likewise points to the fundamental change here. Rather than legal right or jurisdiction, the new criteria for governmental action was based on veridiction—on a form of truth-telling which was itself founded on the new physics of the economy. By letting the market be, rather than regulating it, the *économistes* allowed the natural laws of the market to reveal themselves. On top of this new revelation, indeed through its machinations, a further truth was revealed, the truth of the “good” or “natural” price.

¹¹⁴ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 16.
you allow these natural mechanisms to function, they permit the formation of a certain price that Boisguilbert will call the “natural” price, the physiocrats will call the “good price,” and that will later be called the “normal price”. . . . When you allow the market to function by itself according to its nature, according to its natural truth, if you like, it permits the formation of a certain price which will be called, metaphorically, the true price. . . . \(^{115}\)

Diagnostically, or one should say, veridically, this new truth of the market likewise provided a mechanism for evaluating the relative successes and failures of governmental actions.

\[\text{[t]he market must be that which reveals something like a truth. This does not mean that prices are, in the strict sense, true, and that there are true prices and false prices. But what is discovered at this moment, at once in governmental practice and in reflection on this governmental practice, is that inasmuch as prices are determined in accordance with the natural mechanisms of the market they constitute a standard of truth which enables us to discern which governmental practices are correct and which are erroneous. In other words, it is the natural mechanism of the market and the formation of a natural price that enables us to falsify and verify governmental practice. . . .}^{116}\]

The market, with its \textit{laissez-faire} logic, thus provided a veridical alternative to the juridical limitation of government. Rather than juridical right—determining whether or not the government was within its rights to act—governmental action could now be evaluated with respect to its explicit utility—with respect, that is, to its success or failure in achieving the ends at which it aimed. Ultimately, then, the veridical mechanism of the market supplied a ready means for determining the utility of a given governmental action; such utility, in turn, would determine whether or not an

\(^{115}\) Foucault, \textit{The Birth of Biopolitics}, 30.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 31.
action were proscribed or promulgated. Predicated upon the veridical regime of the market, utility thus functioned as a truth-based mechanism for authorizing and delimiting governmental intervention; it functioned, in other words, as a means through which government could regulate itself, in its own terms—according, that is, to the terms of its own objectives. Determining those objectives, however, was far from a simple matter.

Insofar as the new logic of utility rested upon the veridical structure of the market, it likewise rested upon the freedom of the market and of the individuals who comprised it. It is for this reason that Foucault argues that the naturalism of *laissez-faire* governmentality could indeed be referred to as a “liberalism.”

Freedom is central to the logic of *laissez-faire* governmentality. This governmental reason, he writes,

> is a consumer of freedom. It is a consumer of freedom inasmuch as it can only function insofar as a number of freedoms actually exist: freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the free exercise of property rights, freedom of discussion, possible freedom of expression, and so on. . . . It consumes freedom, which means that it must produce it.

The state’s conceptual ability to conduct itself, to measure the utility of its actions, rested upon freedom; consequently, through its own internal operations—through the mechanisms by which it governed—the state had to produce freedom. Such manufactured freedom, then, was far from the extra-governmental, ahistorical form.

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118 Ibid., 63.
at the heart of natural right. On the contrary, such freedom existed only with reference to the state which was its very source; moreover, bound to the state, such freedom was likewise bound to history. Far from a process of static manufacture, in order to produce freedom, the state had to work constantly to insure the conditions of its possibility. It had to, for instance, prevent global hegemonies, domestic monopolies, restrictive or overly limited labor markets, and the sort of excessive poverty that undercut demand from inhibiting the “free” function of the market. In producing freedom, then, the state had to be dynamic and vigilant in responding to circumstances that threatened the market. Furthermore, in order to respond appropriately, the state required a mechanism, a means for calculating and balancing the various costs of freedom. Here, then, we are returned to the logic of security.

The principle of calculation is what is called security. That is to say, liberalism, the liberal art of government, is forced to determine the precise extent to which and up to what point individual interest, that is to say, individual interests insofar as they are different and possibly opposed to each other, constitute a danger for the interest of all.¹¹⁹

Liberal governments, then, were compelled to analyze the competing forces of divergent freedoms—to analyze, calculate and balance these forces in order to insure the broadest aggregate freedom for the population as a whole. It was, after all, upon this freedom that the market and consequently the new reason of state, the new governmentality of *laissez-faire* liberalism, rested. Here, then, we arrive at

the central paradox of classical liberalism: in order to *let things be*, liberal government had to constantly and assiduously intervene. In order to produce freedom, to secure the conditions for its possibility, government had to actively balance one freedom against another—to use one freedom to cancel out the more broadly damaging consequences of another. According to Foucault, the difficulty of calibrating these balances of intervention and freedom led to a host of crises in liberal governmentality—crises that have spanned its entire history from the eighteenth century up to the current day.\(^1\)\(^2\)\(^0\) Rather than working through all of these crises, however, Foucault leaps ahead to a more contemporary response to their internal problematic—to a new form of liberalism which cancels out the paradox of intervention by thoroughly denaturing the free market.

The new or neo-liberalism to which Foucault turns, had its intellectual roots in a circle of German and Austrian economists working in the 1920’s and 30’s. It was, however, only after the end of World War II that these roots began to take hold in the concrete political and economic foundations of the nascent West German government. For Foucault, the fact that neo-liberalism took hold in the aftermath of the Nazi state is far from incidental.\(^1\)\(^2\)\(^1\) After the collapse of the Nazi regime, the new West German state had to build itself up out of nothing; after this collapse, that is, there was no longer any site of historical or legal legitimacy to which the new

\(^{120}\) Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 68-69.

\(^{121}\) In a nice turn of phrase, he writes, “Nazism was, in a way, the epistemological and political ‘road to Damascus’ for the Freiburg School”—i.e., for the school that was the intellectual center of German neo-liberalism. Ibid., 106.
government could refer. In effect, the entirety of the sovereign and legal authority of the German state had been consumed in the voracious flames to which the Nazi state had given rise. The new government, then, had to construct an entirely new foundation for itself—a foundation that was rooted in its own terms—a foundation, in other words, that had to be entirely self-legitimizing. According to Foucault, it was precisely in the service of filling this essential void, this political vacuum, that the open space free market was marshaled. Rather, that is, than attempting to frame a new government around a sovereignty with no precedent—with no legal or historical anchorage—the West German government opted to frame itself around the economic freedom of its subjects. In so doing—by institutionalizing economic freedom as its core—Foucault argues that the new government was able to actually produce a form of sovereign legitimacy—a form of sovereignty generated through the very circuits of economic freedom. By participating in the free economy, Foucault contends that the people of West Germany were in effect granting their implicit consent to the institution that framed this freedom. In other words, by pursuing their own economic interests, the West German people were effectively drawn into legitimizing and bolstering the government that provided the very basis for such pursuits. Through institutionalizing and insuring economic freedom, the government of West Germany was thus able to harvest the seeds of its own political legitimacy. It is with this in mind that Foucault writes “in contemporary Germany,

122 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 83.
the economy, the economic development and economic growth, produces sovereignty; it produces political sovereignty through the institution and institutional game that, precisely, makes this economy work. Furthermore, Foucault argues that the grounds of such economically-founded legitimacy were even further galvanized through the semiotic alchemy of economic success. With reference to Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Foucault notes that just like the Calvinists who saw economic success as a sign of predestination—of the ultimate legitimacy of having been chosen by G-d for success—the West Germans likewise took their general economic success as a sign of the legitimacy of their new state.

The economy produces political signs that enable the structures, mechanisms, and justifications of power to function. The free market, the economically free market, binds and manifests political bonds. . . . The state rediscovers its law, its juridical law, and its real function in the existence and practice of economic freedom. History had said no to the German state, but now the economy will allow it to assert itself. Continuous growth will take over from a malfunctioning history. Supported by the fulsome participation of the West German people and bolstered, reciprocally and in turn, by its success, the economic foundation of the West German state thus secured the very grounds of its political legitimacy.

Installed as the very foundation of the state, here the economic domain of the market had a very different relationship to the political than had previously been

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123 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 84.
124 Ibid., 85.
the case, even amid the heights of classical liberalism. As noted above, the emergence of *laissez-faire* policy served to limit or rein in the sovereign authority of states that already existed. Within these extant states, the market was meant to serve as a natural space—as a space supervised and maintained by, but otherwise left entirely out of the dominion of sovereign authority. The market, then, was conceived as a space apart—as a space that had to be made room for in the midst of sovereign government. It was after all, only by letting it be, naturally, that the market could serve the state, both as a veridical device as well as toward the ends of fostering its own enrichment. Though the market did serve the state as a veridical proving grounds for the utility of its actions, its service in this capacity was to the state: namely, in helping it to determine the most effective ways of achieving its ends. With the founding of the state upon the market, however, we have something of a reversal. Here the market does not limit the state, but rather, provides its very basis. Here, that is, there is no sovereign state, no political authority outside of the domain of the market; there is, in other words, no extrinsic, autonomous state that could use the market as a tool—as a utilitarian device for pursuing its own interests. On the contrary, with this new configuration, the state is entirely beholden to the market from which its very sovereignty extends. As noted above, the market, in effect, produces the state. Accordingly, the state must serve the market rather than the other way around. The state, in other words, must operate for the market which is the very basis of its authority—without which, it would have no legitimacy;
without which, it would have no right to exist. What we have here, then, is an entirely new formulation of the state—a neo-liberal formulation:

instead of accepting a free market defined by the state and kept as it were under state supervision . . . the ordoliberals [the German neo-liberals] say we should completely turn the formula around and adopt the free market as organizing and regulating principle of the state, from the start of its existence up to the last form of its interventions. In other words: a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market under the supervision of the state.\footnote{125 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 116.}

For the neo-liberals, then, the turn to the economy was likewise, substantially, a turn away from the state. Returning again to the ruins of the Nazi regime as their point of departure, Foucault outlines what he refers to as the “speculative coup de force of the German neo-liberals”—a coup de force that formed the analytic foundation for their critical prescriptions. Unlike their Keynesian contemporaries, the neo-liberals did not see the Nazi state as a monstrous exception—as the cataclysmic result of a state in crisis failing to properly manage the tensions within its economic system. On the contrary, the neo-liberals conceived the Nazi regime as typifying the inexorable outcome of state intervention into the economy tout court. The Nazi regime, then, did not represent the failure of the state to manage contradictions arising naturally within the free market, but rather, an insufficiency of freedom within the market itself—an insufficiency resulting precisely from the economic intervention or attempted management of the state. In brief, the neo-liberals argued that any sort of economic planning by the state would lead to a
vicious circle whereby planning would increase the centralized power and authority of the state; the increase of such centralized authority would in turn strip individuals within the population of their ability to make local decisions—alienating them from one another and from their local contexts through the necessity of their being mediated through a centralized hub; centralization would thus lead to the general bureaucratization and massification of the populace as well as to the general weakening of the economy which, accordingly, would lose its capacity to dynamically respond to localized changes; ultimately then, the atrophied economy and populace would require increased economic protectionism and planning which in turn, of course, would only further increase the power of the state.\(^\text{126}\)

For the neo-liberals, then, state intervention in the economy was an extremely slippery slope—indeed a slope that was substantially independent of its trajectory or goal. According to the neo-liberals, that is, the economic truism of the catastrophic results of intervention crossed all political and economic boundaries. Their formal analysis, they contended, thus applied equally well to Soviet Communism and National Socialism as well as to the Keynesian policies of the New Deal and the Beveridge plan in the United States and Britain respectively. Even, that is, when the aims of economic intervention were to enhance individual freedom by freeing individuals from the damaging results of economic agonism, the ultimate

\(^{126}\) In this brief sketch, I have tried to generally follow Foucault’s argument from *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 110-115. Of course, much more could be said along the lines of connecting political to economic freedom, which serves as the basic thesis of Hayek’s provocatively titled *The Road to Serfdom*.  

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results were always the converse.\textsuperscript{127} Errors in planning, they believed, would inevitably lead to increased intervention as a means of correcting the initial errors, resulting in an ever-downward leading spiral. As Foucault puts it: “And why is this complete loss of freedom inevitable with planning? Quite simply, because planning involves a series of basic economic errors and it will constantly have to make up for these errors.”\textsuperscript{128} But why does planning necessarily involve such economic errors? Here the answer is not quite so simple, but extends from what may be referred to as the epistemological skepticism of the neo-liberals. Unlike the physiocrats, the neo-liberals did not believe that the market could be studied and understood—unpacked as a new form of physics whose natural laws could be plumbed by attentive accounting. On the contrary, the neo-liberals believed that no one could comprehend or foresee the complex workings of the market. “This,” writes Hayek, “is the constitutional limitation of man’s knowledge and interests, the fact that he cannot know more than a tiny part of the whole of society and that therefore all that can enter into his motives are the immediate effects which his actions will have in

\textsuperscript{127} That the sort of freedom implied by economic intervention involved what they perceived as a transformation in the conception of freedom was something entirely eschewed by the neo-liberals. In distinguishing these freedoms, before railing against the latter form, Hayek writes: “To the great apostles of freedom the word had meant freedom from coercion, freedom from the arbitrary power of other men, release from the ties that left the individual no choice but obedience to the orders of a superior. The new freedom promised, however, was to be freedom from necessity, release from the compulsion of the circumstances which inevitably limit the choice of all of us, although some very much more than others. Before man could be truly free, the ‘despotism of physical want’ had to be broken, the ‘restraints of the economic system’ relaxed.” Friederich A. Hayek, \textit{The Road to Serfdom} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 25-26.

\textsuperscript{128} Foucault, \textit{The Birth of Biopolitics}, 178.
the sphere that he knows.” Even central administrators, like the physiocrats, whose task it would be to probe the overall workings of the market could never have more than an abstract grasp that would necessarily distort and occlude the localized reasoning of independent economic agents. Accordingly, Hayek writes,

decentralization has become necessary because nobody can consciously balance all the considerations bearing on the decisions of so many individuals, the coordination can clearly be effected not by “conscious control” but only by arrangements which convey to each agent the information he must possess in order effectively to adjust his decisions to those of others. And because all the details of the changes constantly affecting the conditions of supply and demand can never be fully known, or quickly enough disseminated, by any one center, what is required is some apparatus of registration which automatically records all the relevant effects of individual actions and whose indications are at the same time the resultant of, and guide for, all the individual decisions.  

Ultimately then for the neo-liberals planning was ineluctably flawed insofar as no one, or no body, could countenance and balance the massive complexity of individual interests operative within a working market. As Foucault notes in a related context, what was key here then was less the “hand” of Adam Smith’s famous dictum than its “invisibility.” For the neo-liberals, that is, the market could not be overseen—there was no vantage or bird’s eye view from which to take it all in; likewise, it could not be foreseen. Rather than a predictive physics, Hayek conceived the market more along the lines of evolutionary biology. “[A]ll evolution,” he writes, cultural as well as biological, is a process of continuous adaptation to

130 Hayek, 49.
131 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 279.
unforeseen events. . . [and this is why] evolutionary theory can never put us in the position of rationally predicting and controlling future evolution. All it can do is to show how complex structures carry within themselves a means of correction that leads to further evolutionary developments which are, however, in accordance with their very nature, themselves unavoidably unpredictable.¹³²

Like evolution, then, for Hayek and the neo-liberals the results of the market could only be read after the fact, in their ultimate outcomes. As these outcomes could in no way be foreseen, any effort to direct or control them could only lead to disaster—to the disastrous cycle of intervention and correction that we noted above. Ultimately then, insofar as the market could not be foreseen, it likewise could not be overseen or super-vised from the outside; rather, it must be governed by its own internal workings, by the mechanism of competition.

For the neo-liberals, competition was thus the crucial term. In contrast to a more sweeping rationalism—an overarching rationalism that claimed conceptual purchase upon the entire terrain over which it arched—the skeptical rationalism of the neo-liberals was localized and dispersed in ways that defied synopsis. Rather, that is, than relying on grand conceptual schemes, the neo-liberals relied on the local reason of individual economic agents, each pursuing their own independent aims. The ability to achieve these aims depended substantially upon an agent’s capacity to respond both to the results of his previous actions as well as to changes within his local economic environment. The mechanism for tracking these changes

and thus for charting one’s course was the price system (precisely the decentralized apparatus of registration to which we noted Hayek referring above). For neo-liberals, prices marked the results, the outcomes, of economic competition; but such prices could only be accurate if competition was given free reign. “The important point here,” writes Hayek, “is that the price system will fulfill this function only if competition prevails, that is, if the individual producer has to adapt himself to price changes and cannot control them.”

Any attempt to control prices would clearly undermine their indexical status by substituting prescription for the post facto registration of outcomes. Prices, that is, could only provide reliable results—reliable mechanisms for directing economic activity—if they indeed marked results—the results of undistorted economic competition. For the neo-liberals, then, competition provided an epistemological mechanism—the price system—that did not presume to know, that could not presume to know until after the fact. Accordingly, it provided a means of directing action, of governing, that by definition stood opposed to the dictation of a centralized authority.

Beyond its epistemological dimensions, the neo-liberals moreover believed that competition provided a system that was profoundly internally rigorous.

What constitutes the specific property of competition is the formal rigor of its process. But what guarantees that this formal process will not go wrong is that in reality, if one lets it function, nothing will come from competition, from the economic process itself, that is of such a nature that it will change

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133 Hayek, 49.
In its own terms, in its pure terms, that is, the neo-liberals argued that competition could beget nothing but competition. From their vantage, any distortions appearing within the market could always be traced to extrinsic, socio-political pressures being brought to bear. Even the apparently “natural” distortion of monopoly, they claimed, could be traced—if one looked closely enough—to external mechanisms such as state grants of privilege to one company or another; nationalist protectionisms that secured uncompetitive operations by shielding them from international competition; and even devices such as patents and copyrights, which though they could be productive could also hinder competition by bringing legal strictures into the fray of the market. Furthermore, and as a sort of coup de grâce, von Mises argued that even where monopoly conditions exist, the problem with monopoly is not the singular source of a certain good or service, but rather the possibility that that source, or producer, might manipulate prices in a non-competitive way. Left to the rigors of competition, however—that is, barred from any external mechanisms that would artificially prop up a monopoly—such a privileged supplier would have to act as if it were indeed faced with competition in order to preserve its status. If, that is, such a monopoly were to press its competitive advantage by excessively raising its prices, then it would in fact undermine that

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134 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 137.
advantage precisely by creating the space for competitors to enter into its market—the space produced precisely by its artificially broadened margins. Under the rigors of competition, then, even monopolies could not behave monopolistically, but would be compelled to put forward competitive prices. For the neo-liberals, then, competition comprised an internally consistent, rigorous structure for governing the market; it comprised what Foucault refers to as a “principle of formalization”—a constructivist principle around which could be framed a new, neo-liberal art of government.¹³⁶ It was, then, around this principle and through its rigors that the neo-liberals conceived a new occupation for the state—a new occupation in the service of competition.

Unlike their classical counterparts, the neo-liberals did not believe that the market was a natural mechanism—a system of exchange that would spontaneously erupt if people were simply let be, left to do, *laissez-faire*. Rather than a force of nature commanding respect and thereby drawing a natural limit to the state, the neo-liberals contended that the state had to play an active role in constituting the market. Though of course it could play no role in the market’s internal workings, the state—framed around the market—had to support and protect it, had to be entirely organized around insuring the very conditions of its possibility. Even the more “naïve naturalism” of classical liberalism, Foucault notes, required at minimum the

¹³⁶ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 120.
state’s protection of private property. For the neo-liberals, then, it was natural that the market needed to be cultivated, produced. As Hayek writes, in The Road to Serfdom:

It is important not to confuse opposition against this kind of planning [i.e., economic planning] with a dogmatic laissez faire attitude. The liberal argument is in favor of making the best possible use of the forces of competition as a means of co-ordinating human efforts, not an argument for leaving things just as they are. It is based on the conviction that, where effective competition can be created, it is a better way of guiding individual efforts than any other. It does not deny but even emphasizes, that, in order that competition should work beneficially, a carefully thought-out legal framework is required.

For the neo-liberals, then, even though—precisely to preserve its internal rigor and to keep it free from external distortion—the field of competition, or the market, had to be left entirely free of state intervention, the provisioning of this purely competitive space precisely required the active ministration of the state. The state, that is, had to supply the external framework, the formal structure within which unfettered competition could take place. The legal timbers of this structure were framed around what Hayek refers to as the “Rule of Law.” As Foucault remarks, for Hayek, the Rule of Law is precisely “the opposite of planning. What,” he continues, is a plan? An economic plan is something which has an aim: the explicit pursuit of growth, for example, . . . or reducing the gap between the earnings of social classes. In short, a plan means the adoption of precise and definite economic ends. Second, a plan always allows for the possibility of introducing corrections, rectifications, the suspension of measures, or the adoption of

137 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 118, 120. The phrase “naïve naturalism” refers to the neo-liberal’s eschewal of the naïveté of classical liberalism.

138 Hayek, 36, emphasis added.
alternative measures at the opportune moment depending on whether or not the sought-after effect is obtained. Third, in a plan, the public authorities have a decision-making role. . . . Finally, a plan presupposes that the public authorities can be a subject capable of mastering all economic processes. That is to say, the great state decision-maker . . . is the universal subject of knowledge in the order of the economy.\footnote{Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 172.}

In direct contrast to these principles, the Rule of Law is purely formal. The Rule of Law, that is, provides a set of grounding rules with no particular ends in mind. Accordingly, insofar as they would have no ends, laws structured around the Rule of Law could not be modified in view of their success or failure in achieving their intended aims. Such laws, then, would be reliable and consistent—laws upon which individuals could reliably act without fear of having the very grounds of their action swept out from underneath them. Freed from the precarity of state intervention, then, individuals would be empowered to serve as the decision-makers, not the state. As we have seen, the empowerment of such localized reason was central to the neo-liberal’s way of thought; the very notion of a “universal subject of knowledge in the order of the economy” was, for them, a dangerous absurdity—one leading only to the inexorable end of the totalitarian state. In order to stave off such a totalizing state, then, the freedom of individuals to make their own decisions had to be constituted precisely by the state—by a particular, formal configuration of the state that framed and thereby enabled the competitive marketplace without in any way determining it.
In tandem to these legal structures, the neo-liberals maintained that the state likewise had a broader social dimension to its framing work. While on the one hand, the state had to insure that free competition was possible, on the other, it also had to encourage it. Again, for the neo-liberals, competition was not a natural occurrence; on the contrary, it was something that had to be fostered, created. To a certain extent, this creation followed naturally from the formally constituted legal structure of the neo-liberal state. Insofar as planning was ruled out by the Rule of Law, individuals not only could, but indeed had to make their own decisions. Individuals, that is, could not rely on the state for direction. Moreover, floating directionless was, in effect by corollary, reduced as a viable option. To the extent that the state withdrew from planning, it likewise withdrew from guaranteeing the financial security of its citizens. Beyond the bare minimum of providing for basic survival, the formal structure of the state barred it from intervening in the economic concerns of its citizens. Such intervention, after all, could only distort the competitive rigors of the marketplace. It was with respect to such rigors, for instance, that the state was substantially precluded from engaging in any redistribution of wealth amongst its citizens. Accordingly, citizens were left to their own devices in providing for their economic needs. Again, in this capacity, the state’s obligations were primarily formal in nature; the state, that is, was simply on the hook to provide for the economic circumstances—i.e., the market conditions—within which individuals would be enabled to provide for themselves.
Apart from the passive promotion of competition through the privatization of personal economic security, the neo-liberals likewise employed more positive instruments. As Foucault remarks, with reference to the German neo-liberal Röpke, the neo-liberals had a broad range of social policies aimed at stoking the competitive drive of individuals. Amongst these were policies aimed at extending the access to private property as broadly as possible. Accordingly, neo-liberals (and the German neo-liberals in particular) framed social and political programs which aimed at promoting small, private houses in exchange for large housing blocks; small businesses and cottage industries in exchange for large corporate firms; and small towns and communities in exchange for large urban sprawls. These smaller, more localized concerns were designed with an eye toward encouraging individual participation. With larger firms and organizations, the tendency toward the centralization of authority and, conversely, toward the massification of those arrayed beneath it, clearly countervailed the inspiration of individual initiative. By promoting smaller units in which the individuals involved could more readily identify their roles and responsibilities, as well as the risks and rewards associated with these roles, it was thus hoped that such initiative and the competitive drive that would accompany it could be ignited. As Foucault argues, then, far from a mass market society—“a society of the spectacle”; a society cowed by its mass and unthinking consumption—what was aimed at by neo-liberal social policy was the production of

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an entrepreneurial society—a society of small enterprises, of enterprising individuals.  

In general, then, the neo-liberally conceived state was meant to provide both a legal and social structure for the market which served as its center. The object of this state, then—that which it governed—was not the ungovernable market for which it ruled, but rather, society itself; this, as Foucault remarks, “is a government of society; what the neo-liberals want to construct is a policy of society.”  

For the neo-liberals, then, the object of the government was to “nullify the possible anti-competitive mechanisms of society, or at any rate anti-competitive mechanisms that could arise within society.”  

Put more positively, the function of the state was precisely to produce a society that could actively support competition, that could actively support the free market. The neo-liberally conceived state, then, was again a very active and productive state—a state responsible for creating the very conditions of competition. This was a state which substantially served the free market which pulsed at its very center. For the German neo-liberals, however, this center had in certain ways to be offset. Though like all neo-liberals, the Germans rejected planning or any government intervention in the non-formal substance of the economy, they also believed that the forces of unfettered competition—forces which they likewise fully endorsed—could ultimately prove deleterious to the

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141 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 146-149.  
142 Ibid., 146.  
143 Ibid., 160.
broader fabric of society. While on the one hand, then, they believed that society
had to be organized in order to support the market economy, on the other they
believed that society also had to be structured so as to compensate for the
atomization inherent in market competition. Such compensation, of course, could
not take an economic form—such as the redistribution of wealth or framing policies
with an eye to reigning in class inequalities—without wholly undermining the purity
of competition and thereby sundering the integrity of the market; such
compensation, then, had to take a strictly extra-economic form—a moral and
cultural form. It was, then, precisely with the intention of balancing these two
hands—of balancing what Foucault refers to as the “‘warm’ moral and cultural
values” against the requirements of the “‘cold’ mechanism of competition”\textsuperscript{144}—that
the German neo-liberals established several of the social policies referenced above.
By aiming to promote small, localized enterprises (including the form of small,
privately-owned homes), the German neo-liberals hoped at once to foster both
individual competitive initiative as well as to insure that

the individual . . . is not alienated from his work environment, from the time
of his life, from his household, his family, and from the natural environment.
. . . The return to the enterprise is therefore at once an economic policy or a
policy of the economization of the entire social field, of an extension of the
economy to the entire social field, but at the same time a policy which
presents itself or seeks to be a kind of Vitalpolitik with the function of
compensating for what is cold, impassive, calculating, rational, and
mechanical in the strictly economic game of competition.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{144} Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 242.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
For the German neo-liberals, then, social policy organized around the economy was internally riven by the competing demands for both social and market integrity—by the strains placed on what was considered a necessary social cohesion by the equally necessary demands of market competition. It was in the service of this tension that the German neo-liberal state was compelled to take a more active social role than other, more narrowly economically oriented neo-liberals found advisable. It was, then, across this central fault line that the German neo-liberals parted ways with their Austrian fellow travelers, von Mises and Hayek—travelers who followed a more ardently market-driven path which lead to their formative influence in the more radical developments of American neo-liberalism.\textsuperscript{146}

Unlike the German neo-liberals, the Americans did not use the offices of the state to provide social services as balm to the market economy. On the contrary, they radicalized their economic position by applying the economy, in its raw, ‘cold’ and calculating form to the state and society themselves. For the American neo-liberals, that is, market rationality served as what Foucault refers to as a “grid of

\textsuperscript{146} In this regard, it is worth noting that though von Mises and Hayek participated extensively in the colloquia and intellectual fora around which neo-liberalism formed and, further, that though all the neo-liberals agreed on the prohibitions against economic planning and the central necessity of fomenting competition, the German neo-liberals, primarily due to their belief in quite extensive socio-political intervention, saw themselves as quite separate from their Austrian fellows, to whom, indeed, they referred as paleo-liberals. That the constructivist, competition-driven conception of the market espoused by Hayek clearly marks his position off from anything that could be deemed old or classical liberalism will only be further underscored by the more radical departure from anything classical in the American brand of neo-liberalism which he helped to establish and which we will explore further below.
intelligibility”—as a conceptual schema for reading and understanding society as a whole, including its political structures and operations. In terms of these political structures, in terms, that is, of the machinery of state, Foucault argues that economic reason was brought to bear as external means of perpetual criticism.

Unlike classical liberalism—wherein the natural mechanism of the market was used by the state as a tool of self-regulation; as a tool for determining the utility of its actions in accord with the pursuit of its own ends—in American neo-liberalism, the competitive logic of the manufactured market was wielded by extra-governmental forces as a means of perpetually challenging the state and of thereby keeping it in line. Here, that is, the government did not conduct itself according to the natural guiderail of the market; on the contrary, here the ungloved, invisible hand was used to probe and prod the government—compelling it to operate according to a logic which was not natively its own—according, that is, to the cold rationality of market logic. As Foucault puts it,

\[\text{[I]n classical liberalism the government was called upon to respect the form of the market and } \text{laisssez-faire. Here, laissez-faire is turned into do-not-laissez-faire government, in the name of a law of the market which will enable each of its activities to be measured and assessed. Laissez-faire is thus turned around, and the market is no longer a principle of government’s self-limitation; it is a principle turned against it. It is a sort of permanent economic tribunal confronting government.}\]

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147 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 243.
148 Ibid., 246-247.
149 Ibid., 247.
Along these lines, it is important to recall that according to Foucault one of the key inducements for eighteenth century sovereigns to respect the natural law of the market was to forestall that other natural law which was brought to bear against them by jurists. In the market, then, sovereigns found a form of limitation internal to the very logic of raison d’Etat, which proffered first and foremost the growth and enrichment of the state. The logic of the market thus provided sovereigns with a form of self-limitation that contrasted directly with the extrinsic limitation of the state by laws that preceded and exceeded its jurisdiction. With the new, neo-liberal tribunal against the state, then, we are returned to a circumstance in which government was once again challenged by an external authority—here, by the economic authority of the market. Under the new authority of this economic law, government was commanded to be economic, parsimonious, spare. Here, then, we have the foundations of a central fixture of contemporary American politics—of the perpetual demand for small government. More broadly, though, we have another iteration of the neo-liberal reversal whereby it is not the state that supervises the market—that watches over it from the respectful distance of scientific observation—but rather, the market that supervises the state. American neo-liberalism or anarcho-liberalism, as Foucault sometimes refers to it, was thus no classical or paleo-liberalism; nor, however, was it the sort of social liberalism practiced by the German neo-liberals.
As we have seen, in German neo-liberalism the state operated in the service of the market around which it was centered. The state, that is, provided the legal and social frameworks which were the very conditions of possibility for the market. Nevertheless, even though these legal and social structures worked for the market, they themselves did not fall under the impress of its competitive logic. In other words, though they supported the market, the state and the society which it produced, they remained largely independent of its economic calculus. Indeed, and as noted above, it was precisely by dint of its divergence from the ‘cold’ logic of market rationality that society, under the governance of the state, was able to compensate for the evils of atomization that necessarily attended unfettered competition. In American neo-liberalism, however, just as the state was folded into the logic of the market, so too was society in general in its very breadth and depth.

According to Foucault, the key mechanism of this theoretical enfolding can be clearly apprehended through the American reconception of the logic of labor. The American neo-liberals, Foucault argues, took on labor as the conceptual blind spot of classical political economy. In classical economics, labor was treated simply in the quantitative terms of labor hours. Labor, then, was no more than an undifferentiated input in the broader system of production. It was precisely for this reason, Foucault notes, that Marx was able to mount his famous critique about the abstraction of labor. For Marx, that is, under capitalism labor is transformed into an

\[\text{150 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 219-220.}\]
abstract commodity—into a commodity sold by workers in exchange for a particular wage.\textsuperscript{151} It is precisely by virtue of this sale—of this exchange of the commodity of labor for a prescribed remuneration—that workers become alienated from their labor, which, purchased from them, only returns back to them in the alien and “fantastic form” of objects of value, or commodities, that have been produced through the decontextualized and dehumanized forces of abstract labor.\textsuperscript{152} Though the American neo-liberals were likewise critical of the abstraction of labor, they located the source of this abstraction not in the innate and therefore inexorable processes of capital itself, but rather, in the mode of analysis that had been brought to bear on labor. For the neo-liberals, that is, the abstraction of labor was a problem of conceptualization—one, consequently, which could be resolved through a new form of analysis.

The crux of this new form of analysis turned around the reversal of its starting position. Rather than taking labor up from the vantage of production, from the macroscopic view of the broader economic system, the American neo-liberals took it up from the vantage of the worker himself. Rather, that is, than conceiving of labor as an object, as an abstract input in a process, the American neo-liberals conceived of labor from the perspective of the worker as a subject—as an agent actively involved in the disposition of his resources. As Foucault puts it:

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 72.
[F]or the neo-liberals, economic analysis should not consist in the study of these mechanisms [i.e., the mechanisms of production, exchange and consumption], but in the nature and consequences of what they call substitutable choices, that is to say, the study and analysis of the way in which scarce means are allocated to competing ends. . . . In other words, we have scarce means, and we do not have a single end or cumulative ends for which it is possible to use these means, but ends between which we must choose, and the starting point and general frame of reference for economic analysis should be the way in which individuals allocate these scarce means to alternative ends. 153

From this starting point, then, the neo-liberals framed a new conception of wages and labor. Rather than a price at which a worker sold his labor, the neo-liberals conceived of the wage as an income or revenue stream. An individual earning a wage, then, was not selling his labor, but rather, was getting a return on his investment—on his investment of what? on the investment of the scarce resource of his labor—on the investment, in other words, of his human capital. From this vantage, then, the worker could be seen, precisely along the lines noted above, as an enterprise or entrepreneur. The skills and abilities which the worker possessed could readily be understood as his capital. Over time these skills, this capital, would increase with investment—with experience and education; ultimately, though, as the worker aged his abilities would recede in a form of economic obsolescence. During the course of his working life, then, the worker, as enterprise, had to be assiduous in choosing the best ways to invest his scarce capital; to be an effective enterprise, that is, he had to be careful to maximize the return on his investment.

153 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 222.
Beyond simply creating a new analytical space for labor, though, this rebirth of *homo oeconomicus* as enterprise likewise opened up a much broader domain for social analysis—indeed, the entire domain of society itself.

Conceiving of individuals as enterprises—as investors of capital, actively choosing between mutually exclusive ends—made it possible to read all human actions in economic terms. No longer bound up by the broad processes and mechanisms of the economy proper, neo-liberal theorists were now able to frame their analyses around subjective decision making—around the choices of individuals which themselves resolved to basic cost-benefit analyses—to the profit-driven motivation governing all enterprises. Here, then, we have the mechanism for the “grid of intelligibility” which the American neo-liberals applied in their general, economic conceptualization of society. One of the domains for this neo-conceptualization, as highlighted by Foucault, was criminal justice. According to Foucault, as early as the eighteenth century, polices surrounding criminality were already conscribed in economic terms. Here, then, questions about the costs of crime as well as the judicial costs of its prevention and punishment were already brought to bear—particularly in light of what were seen as the failures of public torture, execution and banishment in lowering the rates of crime.\footnote{Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 248-251.} The eighteenth century approach to cost-cutting in criminal justice amounted to framing laws that were regular and hence readily knowable, proportionate to the crime with which
they dealt and easily appliable by court magistrates. Such laws, then, designed to increase the economy of criminal justice, effectively imported legal concerns into a more broadly economic problematic. These legal concerns, in turn, brought yet another dimension into the treatment of criminality. Insofar as laws only punished acts—which were legally defined as criminal—there was a disjunction between the actors who became the subjects of these laws—or, as Foucault refers to them, *homo penalis*—and the laws themselves. In the nineteenth century, Foucault argues, this disjunction—this paradox of punishing acts which in fact could only ever amount to the punishing of individuals—came to the fore. As a result, instead of laws punishing crimes, a new modality was formed whereby the penal system became responsible for punishing and reforming criminals—those guilty of committing crimes, or *homo criminalis*. Accordingly, a whole new range of sociological, anthropological and psychological discourses were brought to bear on what had begun as an economic problem. It was, according to Foucault, precisely in stemming the tide of this sort of perpetual discursive inflation—in economizing it—that the neo-liberal form of analysis found its particular purchase.

Though the neo-liberals themselves did not engage in the broader questions of history which Foucault brings to bear, their aim was to economize—to economize precisely through restricting their analyses to the level of the economic. In terms of criminal justice, this meant conceiving of the criminal not as a criminal, but precisely as the same sort of rational actor after whom they modeled the worker. The
criminal, that is, was conceived of as being no different from anyone else—was conceived of as *homo oeconomicus*—as a self-modulating enterprise in pursuit of the greatest possible return on investment. Accordingly, in treating criminals, and criminality more broadly, the neo-liberals did not have to import legal or psychological discourses. For them, as Foucault remarks,

> there is no difference between an infraction of the highway code and a premeditated murder. This also means that in this perspective the criminal is not distinguished in any way by or interrogated on the basis of moral or anthropological traits.\(^{155}\)

In other words, the crime, or legal code transgressed, was considered irrelevant; so too was the internal, psychological or sociological motivation for the crime. All that mattered from the neo-liberal standpoint was the formal motivation for the crime—the fact that the criminal, as *homo oeconomicus*, was endeavoring to maximize his profit. The criminal, in other words, was participating in a market of criminality. Unlike in classical economics, here, criminality was not an externality—something extrinsic to the market, which nevertheless affected its operation (in this case, negatively). On the contrary, and as Thomas Lemke remarks, “[f]or the neo-liberals, crime is no longer located outside the market model, but is instead one market among others.”\(^{156}\) Accordingly, the neo-liberals contended that the way to reduce crime was to intervene in its market conditions—to manipulate its supply and demand curves. By introducing a negative demand into the market of criminality—


\(^{156}\) Lemke, 199.
through the police and judicial enforcement of laws—the neo-liberals believed that they could effectively reduce its supply. With this intervention, in other words, the preponderance of crime would no longer be cost effective; the preponderance, but not crime in total. For the neo-liberals, cost-effectiveness was not simply to be applied to the supply of crime, but likewise to the entirety of its market. Negative demand, in the form of law enforcement, costs money. To that extent, the economics of criminality demanded that the costs of this negative demand never exceed the supply of crime. In other words, in order to economize the management of criminality, the costs of law enforcement could never exceed the costs of crime itself. Indeed, even more economically, the neo-liberals argued that though the majority of crime could be prevented for relatively little expense—e.g., most shoplifting could be prevented through the use of simple surveillance cameras—as the supply of crime moved toward zero, the expense of reducing it was met with diminishing returns—e.g., the use of in-store security staff to police all of a stores aisles would be more expensive than the costs of the crimes that it would prevent.

For the neo-liberals, then, the objectives of crime prevention were not to eliminate all crime, but rather to reduce it to economically acceptable levels. While, as Foucault argues, the absolute elimination of crime would require an extremely extensive disciplinary apparatus—one with very tight controls on the population, even down to the level of the individual—the neo-liberal approach indicated that the broad reduction of the majority of crime could be handled quite economically,
without ever touching a single individual. Here, then, we arrive at the governmental mechanism of neo-liberalism.

As with all governmentalities, the conceptualization of a new governmental object brought with it its own particular art of rule. In this case, the radicalized, enterprise conception of *homo oeconomicus* entailed a powerful, though extremely diffuse and indirect form of governance. As exemplified by their thoughts on the management of crime, the neo-liberals did not advocate any direct engagement of the individual. Here, there was no disciplinary apparatus commanding the subject—telling him what to do, how to behave. On the contrary, the neo-liberals proffered employing the market to do the work for them. Rather, that is, than operating on individuals directly, the neo-liberals focused their interventions upon the market conditions or environmental circumstances within which individuals, as enterprises, operated. As Lemke puts it, neo-liberal governmentality “focuses not on the players, but on the rules of the game, not on the (inner) subjugation of individuals, but on defining and controlling their (outer) environment.”157 At bottom, this governmental approach rested upon the neo-liberal convictions that

[a)] any conduct which responds systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment, in other words, any conduct, as Becker says, which “accepts reality,” must be susceptible to economic analysis. [And, b), that] *homo oeconomicus* is someone who accepts reality.158

157 Lemke, 200.
Insofar, then, as neo-liberals framed their mode of analysis around *homo oeconomicus*, the governmental corollary to their theoretical object was thus that individuals could be governed precisely through controlling the environment to which they were bound to respond. Just as with the introduction of negative demand into the market for criminality, the neo-liberals, that is, believed that they could broadly control the choices that individuals would make by modifying the supply and demand curves which framed their decisions. For the neo-liberals, then, *homo oeconomicus* was not simply an analytical device, but likewise a programmatic one—one that provided a strong point of traction between a modality of governing and the subject to be governed. As Foucault, again with reference to Becker, expresses it:

* homo oeconomicus*, that is to say, the person who accepts reality or who responds systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment, appears precisely as someone manageable, someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment. *Homo oeconomicus* is someone who is eminently governable. From being the intangible partner of *laissez-faire*, *homo oeconomicus* now becomes the correlate of a governmentality which will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables.  

Contrary to its classical form—a form which needed to be let be, *laissez-faire*, in order to reveal its natural truths—the neo-liberal variant of *homo oeconomicus* was thus precisely a subject of governance, of conduction. Furthermore, that is, in further divergence from its classical forebear, the neo-liberally conceived *homo*

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159 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 270; see also 252-253.
oeconomicus was by no means thought to be a natural formation—a subject that would emerge on its own if only the subject were left unimpeded; on the contrary, and as we have noted above, such enterprising subjectivity had to be cultivated, produced. In order to gain purchase on its subjects, then—in order to hold and conduct them—neo-liberal governmentality first needed to tend to their constitution.

In producing manageable subjects, neo-liberal governmentality could not rely on disciplinary mechanisms without subverting its own ends. On the one hand, the use of discipline to positively instruct a subject on how to behave would precisely abrogate the form of behavior at which neo-liberalism aimed. In other words, telling a subject how to act—positively ordering his compliance with directives—could only serve to undermine his ability to rationally conduct himself as an enterprise. Following orders, after all, would effectively soften or atrophy the subject’s abilities to make choices precisely by limiting the domain in which he could and indeed must make decisions for himself. Here, then, we return to the general problem of massification, which, as noted above, the neo-liberals believed attended any move toward the centralization of authority. On the other hand, the inefficiency of disciplinary apparatuses runs directly contrary to the economic principle at the very heart of neo-liberal thought. As we have seen through the analysis of crime prevention, beyond a quite nominal point, the extension of positive mechanisms of control can only ever hope to yield diminishing returns. Positive mechanisms of
control, then, have a decidedly asymptotic relationship with their intended aims: the
nearer the goal is approached—i.e., the more resources expended to achieve it—the
more meager the results. In order for neo-liberal government to measure up to its
own standards—in order, that is, for it to fall in line with the economic tribunal
which it itself established—it must thereforeconcertedly avoid the gross expense of
distributed disciplinarity. Quite to the contrary, such government must remain
frugal—limiting its investments to that narrow, steep slice of the asymptotic slope
that maximizes its return on investment. Here then, at the square center of frugality,
we arrive at the truly elegant heart of neo-liberal governmentality.

Rather than expending resources to produce subjects compliant with their
economic reason, neo-liberal governments achieved this effect precisely by virtue of
their frugality—precisely, that is, through restricting their expenditures. As noted
above, by hemming in the social resources that they made available to their
subjects, neo-liberal governments fostered the necessity that these subjects take
care of themselves. Insofar, that is, as neo-liberal governments could not be counted
upon to absorb the economic risks of their subjects—to soften or diffuse the effects
of their failed decisions—these subjects were compelled to manage their own
risks—to perform their own cost-benefit analyses in determining their own courses
of action. In effect, neo-liberal governments produced governable subjects in inverse
proportion to their own interventions: the more they retracted, the more
governable their subjects became. Here, then, we have the absolute model of
economic government: the more thoroughly neo-liberal governments economized themselves, the more thoroughly they cultivated the economic self-government of their subjects. This governmentality was thus light-years beyond the merely analogical form in which a ruler was meant to govern his people as a father his family and a wise man himself; here, the weak power of analogical normativity was replaced by compulsive force. By behaving economically, that is, neo-liberal governments did not simply encourage the economic behavior of their subjects—they did not simply suggest it, through a form of paradigmatic modeling, but rather, compelled it—drove it home through the vacuum force of their withdrawal. In the face of this withdrawal, then, neo-liberal subjects were freighted with the full responsibility for their own successes and failures. Such distributed responsibility, in turn, opened them up to a panoply of institutions promoting various techniques for the “care of the self.” Beyond the narrowly economic institutions, for instance espousing beauty, health and self-esteem and eschewing addiction and other troubled dependencies, linked into the environmental sensibilities exposed through the promulgated responsibility to care for one’s self. The withdrawal of governmental intervention, then, was met with a host of new and diffuse

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160 For more on the linkage between governmentality and the care of the self, see the article by Lemke referenced above, as well as Thomas Lemke, “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique,” Rethinking Marxism, 14, no. 3 (September 2002): 49-64; See also Mitchell Dean, “Foucault, government and the enfolding of authority,” and Barbara Cruikshank, “Revolutions within: self-government and self-esteem,” both in Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, neo-liberalism and rationalities of government, eds. Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne, and Nikolas Rose, 209-230, 231-252 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
mechanisms for conducting the vacuum-minted economic subjects of neo-liberal governmentality. Indeed, such mechanisms penetrated into even the most intimate domains of social life.

In his discussion of human capital, Foucault notes that the institutional logic of investment enters even into the rearing of children, indeed, even prior. Human capital, he remarks, is comprised of both “innate” and “acquired” elements.\(^{161}\) With regard to the innate elements, Foucault argues that from the neo-liberal vantage it is possible to conceive the pre-history of conception in the terms of a genetic cost-benefit analysis. Individuals, that is, seeking to maximize the innate benefits of their offspring will be compelled to calculate and thereby minimize the genetic risks of mating with any particular procreational partner. Framed more positively, if one were to consider one’s own genetic assets as a resource that, at very least, ought not to be squandered, then one’s rational investment would require finding a mate with equal, if not superior, assets. With regard to acquired, post-partum assets, Foucault notes that the foundational elements of child rearing can likewise be viewed from within the formulae of economic calculus. Time spent, attention and affection given, he argues, are initial investments in a child’s human capital—laying the foundations for its ability to productively engage with and respond to its environment. Viewed from the vantage of parents, then, such investments can post extremely positive returns. It is for this reason, Foucault remarks, that the neo-

liberals are able explain away the apparent economic contradiction of the Malthusian behavior of wealthy families. From within the neo-liberal “grid of intelligibility,” that is, the tendency of wealthy families to have fewer children can be readily understood as a means of maximizing their investments in each one.

Leaving the nursery, but staying within the home, Foucault takes up a similar set of analyses forwarded by Canadian economist, Jean-Luc Migué. Citing Migué, he writes

“One of the great recent contributions of economic analysis has been to apply fully to the domestic sector the analytical framework traditionally reserved for the firm and the consumer (…). This involves making the household a unit of production in the same way as a classical firm. (...) What in actual fact is the household if not the contractual commitment of two parties to supply specific inputs and to share in given proportions the benefits of the households’ output?”

From this vantage, then, matrimony is perceived as a contractual framework facilitating the efficient management of day-to-day affairs. The institution of marriage, in other words, offers an economic structure which, like all partnerships, provides for interests to be linked in such a way that the “transaction costs” of each particular agreement are minimized, or economized. Within this framework, that is, each agreement can forego its own distinct contract and thereby the expense that such administrative effort would entail. The household, then, forms an economic trust—one entered into to serve the mutual interests of the parties involved.

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162 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 244.
163 Ibid., 245, bracketed ellipses and emphasis in original.
Accordingly, these interests—the singular interests of the signatory partners—form the very basis of the domestic contract. This contract, then, like all contracts, does not dissolve these interests but, quite to the contrary, depends upon them. As Foucault notes with reference to the political theory of the social contract, “it is not because we have contracted that we respect the contract, but because it is in our interest that there is a contract.”164 In order for a contract to remain valid, then, it must continue to serve the economic interests of its partners—interests which are preserved and indeed institutionalized in the contract itself. To that extent, then—even housed beneath the sheltering eves of the domestic contract—it remains incumbent upon me to “give you the pepper,” if indeed you “pass me the salt.”

With the domestic importation of economic logic, we have thus come full circle in tracing the arc of the law of the home. With Arendt, we saw the way in which this oikos nomos breached the boundaries of the private sphere—leaving the home behind and thereby undoing the classical distinction between the public and the private, between the polis and the oikos. The resulting, hybridized space—neither fully public, nor fully private—was where we began with Foucault’s analysis of the early modern development of raison d’Etat. Under the auspices of raison d’Etat, the kingdom was viewed as an extended home—ruled over by the paternalistic discipline of the king. Here, that is, public rule was economic rule, modeled on the home and driven by the domestic interests in the growth and

164 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 274.
enrichment of the state. As the economic inefficiencies of the model of the home became clear under the stultifying force of the mercantilist, police state, a new model was developed—one based on the natural laws pervading a population that was permitted to naturally pursue its own interests. It was here, under the self-proclaiming banner of political economy, that the new, thoroughly public form of modern economics was born. As the tensions between the natural and the artificial, between the *laissez-faire* market and state intervention, exploded in the cataclysmic political events of the twentieth century, a new, vastly more virulent economic politics emerged. With this latter formation, with the birth of neo-liberalism, that is, the bounds between the home and the political domain were once again breached, but this time from the opposite direction. Under the contracting embrace of neo-liberal governmentality, private subjects were constituted, created, under the paradigmatically public form of privatization. For such subjects, the fully publicized economic mechanisms of competition and cost-benefit analyses were fostered even within their homes, even within themselves. In this way, the governmentality of neo-liberalism was economically extended from top to bottom and from bottom up through a diffuse network of techniques operating on the fully tractable surface of economic subjectivity. With neo-liberalism, in other words, we arrive at the apotheosis of political economy through the absolute economization of the political subject—of a subject bound to public economics, through the economic necessity of the care for itself.
Section II

Aneconomics: Toward an Ethico-political Subjectivity

This section will endeavor to lead away from economic subjectivity toward something other, toward something wholly other. It opens with an in-depth reading of Derrida’s critique of the economic—here understood in the broadest possible terms of any self-enclosed, self-possessed entity or concept. Through the mechanism of this unyielding deconstruction, we will aim to throw open the doors of the oikos, of the private or self-contained, in the name of exposure to the unforeseeable, to that which can never be taken into account—in the name, ultimately, of justice.

Taking off from the open doors that precede it, the second chapter will endeavor to step out of the private entirely. Rather, that is, than holding open the doors that penetrate and support all structures of enclosure, the effort here will center on the constitution of a subject born precisely out of exposure—a subject in other words, whose very identity as a proper self extends from his exposure to the Other who precedes and exceeds him. Following the Levinasian conception of a subject whose origin (or arche) arises before and outside of any capacity that he can be said to possess or set in motion (an-archically), we will endeavor to conceptualize
a subject organized not around his own private interests, but around the exposure
to an exteriority whose demand for response is the very basis of his subjectivity.
Accordingly, we will try to formulate a conception of a political subject defined by
responsibility, not rights—a subject who, given over to the outside before coming
into himself, is publicly, politically committed prior to sparing any thought for the
private.
Chapter 3: Derrida

The concept of economy circulates so broadly throughout Derrida’s work as to be literally indispensible—incapable, that is, of being spent (dépenser) or exhausted. Even in its absence, the figure of economy can be readily apprehended in a long chain of non-synonymous substitutes: e.g., the proper—as pertaining to property, the domain of one’s own, le propre, in French, or the oikos in the original resonance of economy; credit—in the sense of credence or faith—that which extends beyond the moments of self-possession in the knowable (ontic) present—the invisible, ungraspable bridge, that is, between the moments of iteration which indeed make them possible—completing their circuit by tying each one in turn; the calculable—that of which one can give an account (here, frequently with reference to Heidegger’s critical destruction of Leibnitz’s redere rationem); in the turns and returns of the circle—a figure of circulation for Derrida in which the proper departs from its self only to return, completing the circuit fully intact if not richer for the securitized risk of its departure; etc. To put a finer point on it, in response to the self-addressed question, “[w]hat is economy?”, Derrida writes:

Besides the values of law and home, of distribution and partition, economy implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return. The figure of the circle is obviously at the center, if that can still be said of a circle. It stands at the center of any problematic of oikonomia, as it does of any economic field:
circular exchange, circulation of goods, products, monetary signs or merchandise, amortization of expenditures, revenues, substitution of use values and exchange values. This motif of circulation can lead one to think that the law of economy is the circular- return to the point of departure, to the origin, also to the home. So one would have to follow the odyssean structure of the economic narrative. Oikonomia would always follow the path of Ulysses. The latter returns to the side of his loved ones or to himself; he goes away only in view of repatriating himself, in order to return to the home from which (à partir duquel) the signal for departure is given and the part assigned, the side chosen (le parti pris), the lot divided, destiny commanded (moira). The being-next-to-self of the Idea in Absolute Knowledge would be odyssean in this sense, that of an economy and a nostalgia, a "homesickness," a provisional exile longing for reappropriation.\(^\text{165}\)

This, in any case, is Derrida’s conception of economy in the restricted sense.

Derrida’s broader project, however, involves a much different sense of economy. As Alan Bass remarks in a footnote to his translation of Derrida’s seminal essay “Différance”:

For Derrida the deconstruction of metaphysics implies an endless confrontation with Hegelian concepts, and the movement from a restricted, "speculative" philosophical economy—in which there is nothing that cannot be made to make sense, in which there is nothing other than meaning—to a "general" economy—which affirms that which exceeds meaning, the excess of meaning from which there can be no speculative profit.\(^\text{166}\)

For Derrida, then, the work of deconstruction serves to rupture the circuits of any closed economy—to breach the very circle in which that which was expended returns to its spender without loss, or even with the increased returns of profit. We


will re-turn to this circle briefly, but for the purposes of introduction, what is essential to note is that deconstruction disrupts the private sanctity of the self-possessed present. Through its operation, that which appears most easily held onto is made to oscillate unrestrainedly—to phase between possession and dispossession. In this chapter, then, we will trace the disclosure of the openness, of the disjointure, which is not exterior to but at the very heart of perceived closure. Ultimately, we will see that it is precisely due to this immanent exteriority—this outside at the heart of every inside—that deconstruction can serve to kick open the doors of the oikos, in the name of an unconditional hospitality and, moreover, in the name of justice.

On the course of our passage, we will complete a circuit between two sovereignties—between two inheritances that displace each other. The first of these takes root in the sovereign displacement of Hegelian mastery. It is here that we will locate the original call for a “general economy.”

One of Derrida’s earliest and most fulsome treatments of economy proper takes place in his essay on Bataille’s spendthrift inheritance of Hegel—an essay entitled “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve.” Like many Derridean titles, this one is more complex than meets the eye. On the one hand, the first part of this title traces the itinerary of the essay from what Derrida

\[167\] On the relation between “titles” and the law of property, see Jacques Derrida, “Before the Law,” in Acts of Literature, ed. Derek Attridge, 181-220 (New York, Routledge, 1991); and Given Time, the latter of which will be central to our forthcoming discussion.
reads as the traditional Hegelian economism of meaning (remarked above) to an unrestricted form of economy—one which spends itself without reserve and thus with no eye toward and hence no prospect of return. This interpretation, of course, is sound and will substantially govern our reading below; nevertheless, it is only partial, as on the other hand, the second portion of this title wipes away any decisive sense of trajectory—any clear moving from here to there. The reason for this wiping away or erasure by the second hand is to rub out any possibility of capture or constraint—to wipe away any profit in the meaningful movement from $a$ to $b$; to wipe away the very restricted economics of Hegelian reason itself. That this second hand operation, this erasure, is inseparable from the first, marks one of the key gestures of the “double writing” by which Derrida differentiates his theoretical procedure from that of Hegelian dialectics. Speaking in the seminal interview “Positions” of *différance* (a “concept” to which we shall return but which, for now, we can note as both referring to and performing the double writing of deconstruction), Derrida notes that “[i]f there were a definition of *différance*, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *relève* [by which Derrida translates and interprets *Aufhebung*] wherever it operates.”

And further on in the same interview:

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I have tried to distinguish *différance* (of which the *a* marks, among other traits, the productive and conflictual character) from Hegelian difference, and have done so precisely at the point at which Hegel, in the greater *Logic*, determines difference as contradiction only in order to be able to resolve it, to interiorize it, to lift it up [la relever] (according to the syllogistic process of speculative dialectics) in the presence to itself of an onto-theological or onto-teleological synthesis.\(^{169}\)

There are many complex movements around this point in the *Greater Logic*, but to schematize it, one should begin by noting that for Hegel difference is something that emerges through the rational reflection upon the essence of essence, upon simple identity itself. “Difference,” he writes, “is the negativity which reflection has within it, the nothing which is said in enunciating identity, the essential moment of identity itself which, as negativity of itself, determines itself and is distinguished from difference.”\(^{170}\) In reflecting upon identity, that is, Hegel notes that its simple self-relation requires the absolute negativity of the negation of all negation. In order to be entirely self-relating, in other words, identity must exclude anything foreign to its own proper substance—it must, that is, be different from all difference. From within the self-relation of identity, then, difference from all difference serves as a sort of internal negation of negation in which negativity cancels itself out by negating itself, thus leaving the positivity of an identity that exclusively relates to itself in none but its own terms. From the outside, however, this negation of negation or difference from difference establishes the other or antithesis of identity as difference itself—as

\(^{169}\) Derrida, “Positions,” 44.

that which identity excludes and which, from its own vantage, is entirely exclusive of identity. Though for their own parts, each of these theses (namely, identity and difference) excludes its other, it is precisely through their mutual exclusion that each is defined in its own terms: identity is only identity insofar as it is not different; difference, on the other hand, is different only insofar as it is not identical. Though defined through their mutual divorce each of these paired terms is thus intimately and inextricably related to its other. Hegel refers to this relationship as opposition—as the situation in which antitheses are bound to each other by their mutual exclusion—each irrevocably referring to its other but only as a means of retaining its separateness, its own distinct identity.

By digging deeper into these separate identities, however, Hegel uncovers what he refers to as contradictions inherent within each of the two, linked-but-separated terms. With respect to identity, he argues that in its negation of negation, identity turns into its opposite. Identity, that is, becomes the negation of negation; as difference from difference, in other words, it becomes difference itself. Difference, for its part, turns into identity. Insofar as difference excludes all identity, it becomes identical to itself precisely as the self-same exclusion of all identity.\(^{171}\) Through these internal contradictions, each side of the antithesis is thus effectively undone or negated. By discovering their others within their very selves, that is, each

\(^{171}\) For Derrida’s reflections on a similar Hegelian transformation of difference into identity, see the passage on the transformation of the “all-burning” into its contrary on the left-hand column of page 240 of *Glas*—cited below on page 167.
side loses its distinctness. The two can no longer be conceived as separate terms, related to each other only extrinsically in the mutual repulsion of contrast; on the contrary, each is its other, in the innermost interiority of its own essence. The two, then, are one—unified in a broader totality in which each is mediated through the other, preserving the characteristics of each while dissolving the borders that appeared to separate them. It is in this way that the two are both negated and preserved—negated in their apparent distinctness while being lifted up into a self-mediating unity that no longer needs to step outside of itself (by relating to an alien other) in order to establish its identity. Amid this broader unity, the erstwhile opposites flow into and through each other—animating a ceaseless circulation that falls lifeless and silent only under the effort to grasp its pieces singularly, in isolation from each other and from the organic whole that unites them.\textsuperscript{172} Wrapped within this circulatory embrace, the two sides are thus fully comprehended. The difference that had appeared to stand apart from and thus to limit (by virtue of its exclusion) the field of identity, is now revealed to be of a piece with identity and \textit{vice versa}. Neither side limits or is limited by its other; on the contrary, both are lifted up,

\textsuperscript{172} The organic allusion to circulation here is more than incidental. In \textit{The Philosophy of Right} and elsewhere, Hegel conceptualizes of the logic of mediation along the lines of a body. Along these lines, the apparently diverse moments of a broader totality are figured like organs whose function and meaning depends upon their union within the body that contains them. Extracted from this body, the moments become not only lifeless, but incomprehensible. Without knowing their allotment within the organic whole which they comprise, the understanding of such divided and conceptually unrelated tissues will always be, at best, partial and superficial.
included in the broader circuit that unites them and thereby reveals their true integrity. Neither side, then, is left out or excluded.

It is in just this way, along the spiraling course of the Hegelian Aufhebung, that all exteriority is invariably brought within the compass of an expanded interiority. Exteriority, for Hegel, is always the result of incomplete reflection; indeed for Hegel, exteriority marks the very logic of the initial, preliminary step of the triadic dialectic—a step describing a boundary (or limin) that is yet to be passed over.

Speaking of this first step in the Lesser Logic, he writes, “Thought, as Understanding, sticks to fixity of characters and their distinctness from one another: every such limited abstract it treats as having a subsistence and being of its own.” In this guise, thought functions analytically, breaking things down into their constitutive parts. In conceptualizing the objects of its analyses, then, such thinking simply reconstitutes them by amalgamating the pieces into which it previously broke them down. For Hegel, the problem with this procedure stems from the extrinsic nature of its approach. Such a procedure begins by abstraction—by removing properties, one-at-a-time, from the concrete context of the object in which they were mutually imbricated. The first step, then, is one of externalization itself, of abstraction cum extraction. Accordingly, the objects resulting from the secondary recomposition of these externalized parts is not the original—an object in which the diverse

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properties ineluctably interpenetrated each other—but a formal, intellectualized and lifeless representation of the object in which the extracted properties are simply pieced back together, extrinsically related to one another as through a string of attached predicates. Comprised of linked predicates—of externalities heaped one on top of another—such understanding remains irretreievably bound to incomprehension. In the guise of explanation, that is, each external property in turn requires other external properties to explain it. As an additive process, then, such understanding proceeds to incomprehension ad infinitum—always remaining on this side of an infinity that necessarily eludes its grasp. For Hegel, such “spurious infinity” was the necessary fruit of an externalized thinking that could not comprehend the internal relation between interiority and the exteriority that appeared to negate it. Affirmative infinity or the infinity of the Notion, on the contrary, is defined for Hegel by the lack of all definition, of all limits or finitude. Rather than stretching on in the infinite +1 of a movement that would invariably trail it, such infinity is defined by the absence of all exteriority, of all boundaries that

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174 For Hegel, such an infinity—infinitely removed from a finitude that could only ever chase it asymptotically by negating one finitude after another—marks the key boundary, or limit, between his philosophy and that of Kant; it marks the boundary between understanding and reason—a boundary originally inscribed by Kant but subsequently rewritten by Hegel in the latter’s favor. For Hegel, the infinitely removed infinity of Kant—locked behind an unrealizable as if in a regulative Idea or a postulated but incomprehensible eternity—could only ever mark a finite infinity—an infinity that could never be infinite insofar as it was reciprocally limited by the finitude from which it necessarily remained divorced. Hegel’s railing against limitation and boundedness in the thinking of Kant can be seen throughout his work, but with respect to finite infinity, the conclusion of the early piece, Faith and Knowledge, and the sections on infinity from the Greater Logic (from which the inspiration of the current passage largely extends) are key.
could draw a limit on interiority itself. Infinity, in this sense, is literally the lack of limits, the lack of anything that stands outside of or apart from interiority in such a way as to delimit its compass; it is, indeed, the negation of all the negation that limitation necessarily entails. Interiorization for Hegel is thus not simply a consequence of dialectics but its entire governing principle—its ground or ratio, Reason itself.

Spiraling out from this endlessly interiorizing logic, we can now return to Derrida’s problematic and to the grounds of his turn to Bataille. In endeavoring to depart from Hegel’s encompassing theoretical framework, Derrida cannot simply move away from it, negating its procedures without effectively, determinately, reproducing them. He cannot, that is, simply critique Hegelianism from the outside. Any such effort to outflank Hegelianism could only ever open new ground for the operation of the dialectic itself—providing ever-new territory for the expansion of its interiorizing logic. It is “in this way,” Alan Bass remarks, that “there is nothing from which the Aufhebung cannot profit”—nothing, that is, that it cannot take into account and render meaningful within the fluid circuit of its economy; nothing, at any rate, from the outside.

Ever wary of this, dialectic’s unheimlich capacity to make everything at home within its compulsive logic, Derrida proceeds by following Bataille into the hidden recesses of Hegelianism itself. Here we circle back to the pronounced ambivalence in the title of Derrida’s chief work on Bataille. In order to move from a restricted, self-
contained economy—one in which every expense could be readily accounted for—to a general economy thoroughly traversed by unaccountable loss, Derrida suggests that one must, like Bataille, give oneself over to a Hegelianism without reserve. In order, that is, to exceed the closed economics of Hegelianism—an economics in which every expense is held in reserve by the inexorable promise of return—one must become unreservedly Hegelian; indeed, one must become more Hegelian than Hegel himself, taking Hegel at his word, and beyond the limits of his annunciation of that word (his *logos*). One must, as Derrida appositely credits Bataille, take Hegel seriously, seriously up to the point of laughter.

Since more than a century of ruptures, of "surpassings" with or without "overturnings," rarely has a relation to Hegel been so little definable: a complicity without reserve accompanies Hegelian discourse, "takes it seriously" up to the end, without an objection in philosophical form, while, however, a certain burst of laughter exceeds it and destroys its sense, or signals, in any event, the extreme point of "experience" which makes Hegelian discourse dislocate itself; and this can be done only through close scrutiny and full knowledge of what one is laughing at.\(^\text{175}\)

Rather than vainly attempting to outflank Hegelianism—to overturn it from the outside—one must, Derrida suggests, immerse oneself within it; penetrating its depths, only thereby availing oneself of its internal fault lines. It is, then, along these lines, in uncovering these lines, that Derrida follows Bataille into the eye at the center of the Hegel’s whirling logic.

For Bataille, the opening that the circle of Hegel’s logic fails to close is like the blind spot beneath the aperture of the eye. “There is,” he writes,

in understanding a blind spot: which is reminiscent of the structure of the eye. In understanding, as in the eye, one can only reveal it with difficulty. But whereas the blind spot of the eye is inconsequential, the nature of understanding demands that the blind spot within it be more meaningful than understanding itself. . . .

Even within the closed completed circle (unceasing) non-knowledge is the end and knowledge the means. To the extent that it takes itself to be an end, it sinks into the blind spot. But poetry, laughter, ecstasy are not the means for other things. In the “system,” poetry, laughter and ecstasy are nothing. Hegel gets rid of them in a hurry: he knows of no other end than knowledge. His immense fatigue is linked, in my eyes to horror of the blind spot.¹⁷⁶

While this needling of Hegel’s blindness may appear more unreserved than Hegelian, it is paramount to note that the blindness remarked here is not a myopia—a shortsightedness open to correction by the augmentation of its horizon. Like the blind spot in the eye, this blindness is implicit in the very act of its perception. According to Bataille, that is, Hegel is not blind because he does not see enough, but because he is confined to the dimensions of sight itself—to the visible, to that which can be made to show up and thus taken into account. Indeed, for both Bataille and Derrida, Hegel’s foresight in the dimension of visibility is inescapable. It is precisely for this reason that his logic cannot be assailed from without—cannot be objected to “in philosophical form.” The problem with Hegel’s vision, then, is that as with eyesight, it is incapable of apprehending the invisibility inherent within its very

operation. Blinded by the success of what his system made visible, Hegel, in other words, failed to see the depths of his own perception. In Bataille’s words, “he did not know to what extent he was right.” And what he was so right about, according to Bataille, was the critical importance of death in living a truly human existence.

Bataille’s sense of the centrality of death in Hegel substantially extends from Kojève’s deeply influential reading of the latter. As Bataille repeatedly notes in his essay “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” Kojève goes so far in his fatal elucidation of Hegel as to refer to humankind as “death which lives a human life.” The basis for this conceit is a passage to which Bataille refers in the section heading “A Fundamental Text”—a passage from the Phenomenology of Spirit in which Hegel writes the following:

Now, the life of Spirit is not that life which is frightened of death, and spares itself destruction, but that life which assumes death and lives with it. Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment. It is not that (prodigious) power by being the Positive that turns away from the Negative, as when we say of something: this is nothing or (this is) false and, having (thus) disposed of it, pass from there to something else; no, Spirit is that power only to the degree in which it contemplates the Negative face to face (and) dwells with it. This prolonged sojourn is the magical force which transposes the negative into given-Being.

178 If the phrase “truly human” in this context echoes that mentioned with reference to Arendt above, the resonance is far from accidental. Indeed as we will see, there are quite a few interesting intersections between Arendt’s reading of the Ancient Greeks and Bataille’s strongly Kojèvian reading of Hegel.
In order to rise to the level of Spirit—to the level of the dialectical unfolding of truth—a living being must not only be exposed to death—a fate, by definition, shared by all that is alive—but must face death and dwell with it. Such a being, in other words, must come to terms with death; must appropriate it; must own it in the very core of its living. Only in so doing can such a being separate itself from sheer necessity of its biological existence. Only, that is, by taking on its death, both acknowledging and owning up to it as something which it is willing to risk, can a being exceed the merely factual bounds of its existence. By facing death, by dwelling with and risking it, a being reveals that it conceives itself as more than the naked fact of its given being; it reveals that what it is exceeds the fact that it is, up to and including the possibility of its own annihilation. For Hegel and for Kojève following him, humans are the only beings endowed with the capacity to countenance this ultimate negation, the negation of their very selves.

Inscribed with this capacity, humans are divorced not only from their own animality—from the animality of their biological existence—but likewise from animality and indeed nature in general. Dismembered to the core by their own, proper mortality, humans are marked by a sense of their individuality. As we noted above with respect to Arendt, mortality only makes sense in the context of individuals that cease to exist. Undistinguished members of a species obtain within a stream of being that is ceaseless by virtue of the perpetual flow of generation. As
Bataille describes it:

The animal, negating nothing, lost in a global animality to which it offers no opposition just as that animality is itself lost in Nature (and in the totality of all that is)—does not truly disappear.... No doubt the individual fly dies, but today's flies are the same as those of last year. Last year's have died?... Perhaps, but nothing has disappeared. The flies remain, equal to themselves like the waves of the sea.  

In coming to terms with their death, human beings, on the contrary, likewise come to terms with the fact that they will at some point cease to be—that their lives are finite. Indeed such is the very meaning of their coming to terms with death. By living up to their deaths—by acknowledging and risking them—humans at once both embrace and exceed their finitude. On the one hand, coming to terms with their mortality underscores their uniqueness—the limits of their earthly tenure and the impossibility of their ever being replaced. On the other, such uniqueness reveals both the necessity of change and the possibilities which such necessity unfolds. Insofar as the recognition of mortality entails the recognition that individuals will die without being replaced, it likewise entails the recognition of change as a permanent feature of the world. That the world indeed undergoes change means that it is indeed subject to change; that it changes, means that it can be changed. Faced with the necessary change of their own mortality—the negation of their very selves—human beings are thus likewise faced with the possibilities of negation in general, of change. Marked by the mortally scarred passage of time, they likewise learn that

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they can mark time’s passage—mark even their own passing by making changes in
the world that testify to the uniqueness of their having been, to their separation
from the anonymous waves of timeless generation. It is in this way that human
beings both enter into and become the agents of History. It is in this way, according
to Bataille, that they are freed into servitude.

For Bataille, the freedom from the necessity of \textit{what is} that is unleashed by the
human apprehension of mortality entails, at best, a domesticated liberation—a form
of mastery locked in the bonded service of History. According to Bataille, the
meaning of this bondage is meaning itself—the overriding necessity of
comprehension, of making sense out of \textit{this} in the light of \textit{that}. Meaning, like the
history that serves it, or the History it serves, must be made to show up—it must be
rendered accountable and thereby taken into account. Only that which can be made
sense of can be understood as meaningful. Accordingly, the mandate of meaning
only asks questions—ventures outside of the sphere of the known—on the provision
of returning with answers, of increasing the compass of that which makes sense. Its
procedure then is of a specific sort—of a sort that must necessarily turn a blind eye
to that which refuses to reveal itself—to that which does not point toward an
explanation in the light of which it makes sense. It is in this light, then, that we can
make sense of Bataille’s diagnosis of the blind spot in Hegel and, moreover, of his
remark that Hegel “did not know the extent to which he was right.”\textsuperscript{182} According to Bataille, Hegel “did not know to what extent he was right” about death for the simple reason that he took it too seriously. For Hegel, death needed to make sense. Following Hegel’s trajectory, it indeed makes sense, very compelling sense, that death teaches change and that change in turn teaches both the lesson of history (in the passage of time) and the necessity of making History (in the objective transformation of the changeable world). For Bataille, however, this well-reasoned accounting precisely misses the unaccountable depths of the dismemberment that death properly entails.

According to Bataille, Hegel veers from these, the true depths of his perceptions, at the very point at which death takes center stage and with it the notions of liberation and bondage. As we noted above, a human being can only rise to the level of humanity by exceeding the necessity of its natural existence; only that is, by facing up to and risking its mortality, can such a being embrace its freedom from what is. The principal Hegelian account of the emergence of such freedom takes place in the “Lordship and Bondage” section of the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, commonly referred to as the master-slave dialectic. As Derrida notes, the “subtle corridors” of this well-known passage “cannot be summarized without being mistreated.” For our purposes, however, following Derrida, who in turn follows Bataille, the salient features of the dialectic are substantially confined to its first

\textsuperscript{182} Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 22.
movement and can be roughly sketched out as follows: The master, or lord, rises to the level of freedom precisely by risking his mortal existence. By being willing to pay the price of his own annihilation, the master is able to surmount his adversary, who faced with the prospect of his own negation, shudders and turns away from the brink, yielding to the master and thereby accepting his own subordination as slave or bondsman in exchange for the preservation of his existence. For Bataille, and for Derrida reading him, the key point in this albeit thin sketch centers on the necessity of the slave’s preserved existence. Confining ourselves to the level of the logic in operation here (both for the sake of exigency and in resonance with the threads of our earlier discussion), the necessity for this preservation becomes rather quickly apparent. At bottom, without a slave, there can be no master; the two are mutually informing, dialectically mediated positions, each giving form and content to the other through the dynamics of their inexorable interrelation. Prior to the resolution of their struggle, the master and the slave are simply opposed antitheses, neither master nor slave; each abiding in an independent existence; each challenging the other’s freedom to determine and not be determined by what is by virtue of their competing claims to be the determining subject. Were the victorious combatant to destroy his foe, then in the end, his position would be no different from where he began. He would continue to have a claim to independence, but he would have no claim to mastery as the very substance of his superordination—the proof of his dominance over external circumstance—will have been destroyed with his
vanquished foe.\textsuperscript{183} He will be no less than he was before, but likewise, no more, as any new challenge to his independence will occur on the self-same ground of one self-certainty confronted by another. Perpetually open to the static replay of endless challenge, his position, in other words, will be no more certain and hence no different from its previous station. For all his bellicose effort, then, he will have gained no ground; he will remain at a standstill.

Hegel refers to such negation without movement as abstract negation—as a form of uncreative destruction \textit{antithetically} juxtaposed to dialectical negation. As we noted above, dialectical negation entails the simultaneous cancelation and

\textsuperscript{183} Indeed it is for similar reasons that Hegel posits the necessity of the master-slave dialectic in the first place. As he remarks in paragraphs 174-175 of the \textit{Phenomenology}, though a human being could begin to demonstrate its independence by superseding objects in the world, such supersession performatively subverts itself by removing the object which was its target from the world, thereby removing the continued possibility of its supersession. In other words, by superseding or negating an object in the world, human beings likewise negate their capacity to supersede the object, which, once superseded or negated, is no more. Human beings are thus locked in a serial paradox of dependency: their independence dependent upon the independence of objects whose independence they must destroy in proving their own independence. Accordingly, in order to overcome this paradox, a human being must encounter an object, the independence of which is not destroyed by its being negated. It must in other words, encounter an object capable of preserving its independence in the midst of its negation—an object therefore that is capable of negating itself; of undoing itself while remaining itself; of undoing itself separately and independently and of therefore remaining available to the continued dynamics of supersession. Ultimately, then, it is for this reason that a human being must encounter another human being—one willing to negate its own will in favor of the other, who subsequently becomes the master. (It is only later, after the interval of delay is introduced through service to the master, that objects in the world are able to take on a form of durability that can confirm independence without being utterly destroyed in the process. It is, then, only through the later dialectical operation that labor is able to take on the aspect of conferring the ultimate form of mastery to the slave.) See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, \textit{Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit}, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), §174-175.
preservation, the lifting up, of the opposed antitheses. In the case of the master-slave dialectic (in the dialectical instance in which neither party is killed), the two opponents are both negated and preserved: negated as their formerly atomic selves and transformed via a new relationship that redefines them both, as master and slave respectively. The position of the master—as a freedom externalized, objectified and confirmed by the recognition of the slave—entails an entirely new understanding of freedom as does its converse, in servitude. The dialectical resolution of the life-and-death struggle for independence, then, brings forth new meanings, new revelations which are in turn subject to their own dialectical transformations. It is in this way, that death is made meaningful—that its negation is negated, killed off such that it can be re-invested with significance; it is in this way, as Derrida says, that it is amortized.\footnote{See Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve,” in \textit{Writing and Difference}, 317-350.}

For Bataille, this return on investment (ROI), though perhaps princely (if not kingly) is nevertheless far from sovereign. According to Bataille, that is, the sacrifice of death to meaning reveals a certain servitude in the heart of Hegelian discourse, indeed in discourse, full stop. By turning a blind eye to the death that actually dies—to the meaninglessness of abstract negation—Hegel makes what Derrida refers to as an interpretive decision—a fatal decision to be bound by interpretation.\footnote{Derrida, \textit{Writing and Difference}, 328. Here Derrida argues that the interpretive decision in favor of meaning suppresses the ground of play within which meaningful coherence arises as a possibility. The interpretive decision that foregrounds the necessity of meaning, that is,
is only through the exigencies of meaning that Hegel is able to perceive abstract negation as meaningless. Abstract negation, in other words, only appears as meaningless through the lens of meaning to which it is juxtaposed. It is because meaning demands movement—demands a sens, in the sense of a direction that reveals its raison d’être; that explains its why—\(^{186}\) that it must turn away from the dead end of death. Death puts an end to movement; it does not signify. Rather than a light of revelation, death opens out unto what Bataille refers to as “sacred horror:”

the richest and the most agonizing experience, which does not limit itself to dismemberment but which, on the contrary; opens itself, like a theatre curtain, onto a realm beyond this world, where the rising light of day transfigures all things and destroys their limited meaning.\(^{187}\)

Unlike the meaningful revelations of dialectical thought, which aim at comprehension—at the linking of this to that in signifying chain that links back on itself, closing its circle against any beyond—the light of sacred horror is the light of the beyond itself—bursting comprehension by exceeding the very limits of meaning. Sacred horror cannot be thought. Indeed collecting it into a substantive, already re-inscribes sacred horror within the logic of dialectical thought: As that which cannot be thought, sacred horror resolves into the antithesis of thought, into its negation—into the meaninglessness that we noted above. In that capacity, sacred horror readily serves meaning as a negation that readily negates itself: meaninglessness, in

observes its lack of necessity as one choice amongst others in an unrestricted field of possibilities.

\(^{186}\) “Why” in this sense is to be understood, to be explained, to be given its why with respect to Heidegger’s writing on the “why” in the Principle of Reason.

this sense, literally makes meaning, becomes meaningful as that which lacks meaning; such is its significance amid the consolidating logic of significance itself. As Derrida, however, takes pains to make clear, such consolidation (precisely by virtue of its consolidation) wholly misses the mark of the radical negativity of the sacred horror of death. Here, then, we return to the blind spot around which we have been turning.

The blind spot of Hegelianism ... is the point at which destruction, suppression, death and sacrifice constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity—here we would have to say an expenditure and a negativity without reserve—that they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or a system. In discourse (the unity of process and system), negativity is always the underside and accomplice of positivity.... Now, the sovereign operation, the point of nonreserve, is neither positive nor negative.... Hegel, through precipitation, blinded himself to that which he had laid bare under the rubric of negativity. And did so through precipitation toward the seriousness of meaning and the security of knowledge. This is why “he did not know to what extent he was right.” And was wrong for being right, for having triumphed over the negative. To go “to the end” both of “absolute rending” and of the negative without “measure,” without reserve, is not progressively to pursue logic to the point at which, within discourse, the Aufhebung (discourse itself) makes logic collaborate with the constitution and interiorizing memory of meaning, with Erinnerung. On the contrary, it is convulsively to tear apart the negative side, that which makes it the reassuring other surface of the positive; and it is to exhibit within the negative, in an instant, that which can no longer be called negative. And can no longer be called negative precisely because it has no reserved underside, because it can no longer permit itself to be converted into positivity, because it can no longer collaborate with the continuous linking-up of meaning, concept, time and truth in discourse; because it literally can no longer labor and let itself be interrogated as the “work of the negative.”188

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188 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 259.
According to Derrida’s reading of Bataille, then, Hegel’s blind spot resulted from his not having gone far enough in his pursuit of the negative. Through confining himself to a conservative negativity—to the dialectical negativity of the Aufhebung in which everything negated is preserved and lifted up—Hegel held too much back, held too much in reserve. Accordingly, by reservedly holding back, Hegel was allowed to go too far—to go to the point of “having triumphed over the negative.” By holding onto everything that it gives up (or negates), the dialectical system is permitted to keep everything it encounters well within the confines its circulatory embrace; never having to let anything go, that is, it never has to countenance being punctured or disrupted by the unassimilable, by an excess that opens it unto an exteriority that it cannot accommodate. Unimpeded, then, it can continue to flow, to circulate, to circle its self-contained loop without end. By not having pursued negativity without reserve, without holding back, Hegel was thus allowed to go too far, to go infinitely far without ever being arrested in his path by the utter dismemberment of radical negativity. Radical negativity represents an opening that cannot be closed—an abyss so without grounds as to be unable to support even its converse, positivity. It is for this reason, as Derrida notes, that it can no longer even properly be called negative. Unlike the determinate negation of dialectics, such negativity provides no stepping-stones, nothing to push off of; here there is only a gaping chasm, boundless and

189 Compare the profitable holding onto everything that is given up to the handing over that is also a keeping in hand in Heidegger’s essay, “The Anaximander Fragment,” in Early Greek Thinking, trans. David F. Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 43-52—a piece to which Derrida refers in reflecting on the logic of the gift in Given Time, 159.
without shape—a bottomless pit that greedily absorbs everything that pours into it, without return. Void of any anchorage or traction, such negativity puts an end to all forward movement, to all motion, full stop. It is for this reason that it permits no work.

Its utter incapacity for work is precisely what links radical negativity up with Bataille’s conception of sovereignty. Just as radical negativity bars even the meager domestication, the meager service, of opposing and thereby supporting the positive, so too does sovereignty prohibit all work. “What distinguishes sovereignty is the consumption of wealth, as against labor and servitude, which produce wealth without consuming it. The sovereign individual consumes and doesn’t labor.” While at first glance, and indeed within the unmediated confines of its position, this definition appears to map up precisely with Hegel’s conception of the master—who consumes the fruits of the slave’s labor without in any way producing himself—such apparent congruity overlooks the very basis of mastery. As we noted above, the master is master only by the mediated virtue of the slave who is subordinate to him. The master, to be master, requires the slave. Accordingly, the master must restrain himself from annihilating the slave—he must hold back, hold his powers in reserve with an eye toward a future return: namely, the annuity of the slave’s servitude which will stand as the basis for his continuing mastery. The master then, as master,
is from the outset bound by servility—bound by the servitude that serves him.\textsuperscript{190}

Such is the significance of Derrida’s elliptical point:

Once sovereignty has to attempt to make someone or something subordinate to itself, we know that it would be retaken by dialectics, would be subordinate to the slave to the thing and to work. It would fail for having wanted to be victorious, and for having alleged that it kept the upper hand.\textsuperscript{191}

He continues, “Lordship [mastery], on the contrary, becomes sovereign when it ceases to fear failure and is lost as the absolute victim of its own sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{192}

Sovereignty, then, requires the absolute loss of the will to mastery, to victory and domination—even in its more craven and tenacious form as the fear of loss. For “what is sovereign,” as Bataille forcefully remarks, “does not serve”; it cannot serve, not even the end of its own dominance. To have an end would be to have an aim beyond itself—to have a goal to which it must give itself over; to which it must subordinate itself. Serving even the end of its own dominance would thus entail the very end of sovereignty—its succumbing to servility; to utility; to work. Sovereignty, then, can have no plans—can engage no projects; its temporality is that of the \textit{instant}. Such instants, however—instants of joy, laughter, tears, eroticism, “\textit{sacred

\textsuperscript{190}In its second major turn, servility in the master-slave dialectic becomes even more pronounced, as labor, or the deferred investment of work, becomes the key to the logic of recognition. This too is a point that Derrida highlights in his reading of Bataille: “And when servility becomes lordship, it keeps within it the trace of its repressed origin…. The truth of the master is in the slave; and the slave become a master remains a ‘repressed’ slave. Such is the condition of meaning, of history of discourse, of philosophy, etc.” Derrida, \textit{Writing and Difference}, 255.

\textsuperscript{191}Derrida, \textit{Writing and Difference}, 265.

\textsuperscript{192}Ibid.
horror,” etc.—are not mystical moments of pure presence. On the contrary, “the instant—the temporal mode of the sovereign operation—is not a point of full and unpenetrated presence: it slides and eludes us between two presences…. The instant is the furtive.” Any effort to hold on to or grasp the sovereign instant would necessarily entail its loss as even the minimal return to self of self-possession or-consciousness required by experience would likewise require the deferral of delay. The experience of the sovereign moment, in other words, would require the linking of the “absolute dismemberment” of the self to the self dismembered; the dismembered self, then, would have to be absolved of its absolution, or fully recovered, in order to catch hold of a trace or a furtive glance of the rupture that would necessarily be no more—that would necessarily have already passed. To enter into the sovereign instant, then, one must give oneself, even one’s self, over entirely, without reserve; here, there can be no holding back with an eye looking

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193 Ibid., 263.
194 That presence is tied to self-presence is a point that Derrida plainly states in the essay “Différance” in Margins of Philosophy, 16; though a more extended discussion can be found in his reading of Husserl throughout the text of Speech and Phenomena.
195 Like the ruse of reason by which the master and slave are enabled to experience death without dying—a ruse for which Derrida notes Bataille’s silent laughter in Writing and Difference, 255-256—so too does the experience of the sovereign instant entail a ruse—a distortion in perception that feigns the perception of the imperceptible. Accordingly, with regard to the paleonym “experience,” one must be careful here to bracket the phenomenological epoche with its insistence on the eidetic experience of the living-present. Derrida pushes toward these brackets in his mention of the “epoche of the epoch of meaning”—an epoch still alive and well in the phenomenological epoche. Derrida, Writing and Difference, 268.
196 As Derrida says, “sovereignty has no identity, is not self, for itself, toward Itself, near Itself.” Derrida, Writing and Difference, 265.
forward as here, even the I to which the prospective eye corresponds must be utterly foreclosed—blinded to all revelation. Sovereignty, then, entails absolute loss—a loss that is lost with every gain. Indeed, even placing sovereignty on the far side of gain risks going too far (infinitely far). Sovereignty cannot be conceived in contrast to gain without risking gainful employment as a means of escaping gain—of transgressing gain and thereby of gaining loss;\(^{197}\) sovereignty, in other words, cannot be conceived in its transgression of gain without (dialectically) turning into its opposite.\(^{198}\) The fact that sovereignty can be so easily recaptured, domesticated and put to work (gainful employment) is not incidental but points to the way in which that which exceeds the profitability of meaning readily gives itself over to its folds—the way in which that which gives itself over completely, without reserve, gives itself over to being taken in, completely, and thereby lost to loss.

This logic of the loss of loss—of the ineluctable (re)turn of the non-dialectizable to the dialectic—in no way escapes Derrida; indeed, it forms one of the

\(^{197}\) Even the project of gaining sovereignty would entail its loss, as Bataille plainly notes: “in fact, if I search for it, I am undertaking the project of being-sovereignly: but the project of being-sovereignly presupposes a servile being!” Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 27.\(^{198}\) This risk of dialectical return in the face of transgression is one noted guiltily by Bataille and remarked by Derrida: “It is useless to insist upon the Hegelian character of this operation [the transgression of prohibition], which corresponds to the moment of dialectics expressed by the untranslatable German verb Aufheben (to surpass while maintaining).” Derrida, Writing and Difference, 275. Derrida unburdens Bataille of the guilt of transgression by indicating the way in which his Aufhebung is “analogue” and “empty”—related to the proper, Hegelian Aufhebung by a name that no longer names anything, that no longer signifies anything that can be returned to sense as meaning. Transgression, in this sense, no longer pushes up against the restriction (or restricted economy) of prohibition, just as radical negativity no longer pushes against positivity and accordingly “can no longer be called negative.”
central passages of his most sustained writing on Hegel in the left-hand column of

*Glas.* Reflecting on the pure, all-burning, all-giving light—the fire or sun—at the
center of Hegel’s meditations on natural religion, Derrida asks: “How can the self
and the for-(it)self appear? How would the sun of the all-burning breach/broach its

[sa] course and its going down [déclin]? He replies:

> Here is experienced the implacable force of sense, of mediation, of the hard-
> working negative. In order to be what it is, purity of play, of difference, of
> consuming destruction, the all-burning must pass into its contrary: guard
> itself, guard its own movement of loss, appear as what it is in its very
disappearance. As soon as it appears, as soon as the fire shows itself, it
remains, it keeps hold of itself, it loses itself as fire. Pure difference, different
from (it)self, ceases to be what it is in order to remain what it is. That is the
origin of history, the beginning of the going down [déstin], the setting of the
sun, the passage to occidental subjectivity. Fire becomes for-(it)self and is
lost; yet worse [pire] since better.  

In its first light, the all-burning fire of the sun is pure effusion; it gives out pure
luminosity without illumination. Absent any other in which it could be reflected—in
which it could bounce back and return to itself—this light alights on nothing; reveals
nothing—not even shadow which would illuminate its essence in its obstruction. As
Derrida notes, for Hegel the incapacity of this primal light to reflect on itself bars it
from ever being *for-itself* and thus from arising (or setting) to the level of essence.

“Essence,” writes Hegel, “which is Being coming into mediation with itself through
the negativity of itself— is self-relatedness, only in so far as it is relation to an

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of Nebraska Press, 1987), 239a.
200 Ibid., 240a.
Other.” Citing Hegel, then, Derrida refers to this light as “pure, ‘essenceless by-play.’” Insofar as it has nothing to reflect upon, this light has no way to return to itself—no way of entering into mediated self-relation. Having no prospect of return, then, this light is pure effusion—a pure giving out that stands no hope of gain; it is pure loss. As such, as pure loss, this light thus exceeds the dialectic; in its purity, however, it returns. In order to be what it is—namely, a pure loss without reserve; a giving without holding back—the all-burning, all-giving light turns into its opposite. In its effusive purity, this light that holds nothing back must hold itself back in its absolute lack of restraint. In order, that is, to hold nothing back (to maintain itself as itself, as that which holds nothing back), the all-giving light must guard itself against such reserve—it must hold itself back from holding anything back. This is the sense of Derrida’s remark when he notes that it must “[cease] to be what it is in order to remain what it is.” By ceasing to be what it is—by passing into its opposite—the primal light is thus able reflect back on itself for-itself, to illuminate itself and to thus give birth to illumination—to the light of revelation, of meaning and sense. This then is the setting of the primal sun—the eclipse of pure loss—that gives rise to the profitability of dialectical meaningfulness. As Derrida notes, this loss of loss—this sacrifice of sacrifice—is inevitable:

the play of the pure light..., the all-burning offers itself as a holocaust to the for-(it)self.... It sacrifices itself, but only to remain, to insure its guarding, to bind itself to itself, strictly, to become itself, for-(it)self, (close)-by-(it)self. In

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201 Hegel, Hegel's Logic (Lesser Logic), §112.
order to sacrifice itself, it burns itself. The burning then burns itself and goes out....

He continues, “the gift, the sacrifice, the putting in play or to fire of all, the holocaust, are under the power of [en puissance d’] ontology. They carry and de-border it, but they cannot not give birth to it.” The all-burning, all-giving light cannot not burn itself out: it cannot escape revelation—the illumination of what is, of that which appears under the name of ontology. The inevitable loss of loss to gain (to meaningful revelation), however, is only half of the picture; the fact that there is (es gibt) loss at the birth of gain gestures towards the other half.

The manner of this gesture is a trace—a trace that makes that which appears in presence (that which is gained within its light) possible while at the same time marking its impossibility. According to Derrida, the presence of all that appears in presence—indeed presence itself—is marked from the outset by the non-originary writing of the trace. For its part, the trace is the inscription of différance—the bifold neographism meant to signify both deferral and difference, thereby restoring the lost ambi-valence of the Latin root (differre) of the French word différer. The significance of this etymological return is to undo the very work of origination—to deconstruct the logic of the non-derivative in all of its archic priority. Indeed the very

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202 Derrida, Glas, 241a.
203 Derrida, Glas, 242a.
204 Here, “ontology” is intended in the sense of onto-theo-logy—in the sense of the presence or parousia of beings—and not in the sense of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, to which it is fundamentally opposed. Indeed, as we will see further, Derrida equates the absolute loss which is lost here to the gift, to that which es gibt, which stands at the heart of Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology.
turn to language here is significant—pointing toward the way in which the linguistic
sign articulates the very logic of deferral. “The sign,” Derrida writes, “represents the
present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or
show the thing... when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through
the detour of the sign.... The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence.”205 The logic of
this deferral, Derrida goes on to explain, is predicated upon the premise of a
restored present—of a present that can come and redeem the promise of the sign
that was its proxy. According to Derrida, however, this promise entirely misses the
other key aspect of the sign—an aspect brought to light by the structuralist
linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and which in turn illuminates the second aspect
of différance. Central to Saussurian linguistics is the notion that signs are both
“arbitrary and differential”—indeed it is their differential characteristic that provides
for their arbitrariness. Rather than being distinguished by positive traits (by, for
instance, semantic content with regard to the signified or formal resemblance with
regard to signifiers), Saussure argues that signs are differentiated by their shear
differentiability, by the fact that they can be repeatedly and systematically
discerned. What constitutes the identity of any given sign, then, is not anything
intrinsic to the sign itself but rather its difference from all of the other signs that
comprise the system of which it is a part. Its significance—its ability to signify—is
thus not based on anything internal to the sign but rather on its relative position

205 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 9.
within the field of differences that constitute it. This pertains to the signified, the conceptual payload of the sign, just as much as it does to the signifier—a point that Derrida is careful to note: “every concept,” he writes, “is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences.” Taking this up, then, Derrida argues that all signification—all making of meaning—operates through différance—through both the deferral of reference as well as through difference. Indeed, penetrating to the heart of the matter, Derrida unveils the signifying logic of différance within the seminal sign at the center of metaphysical thought—presence itself. He writes,

> It is because of différance that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called "present" element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not.  

That which appears as present, in other words, and which thereby constitutes the presence of the present, only does so by virtue of its contradistinction or difference from the past and the future. Accordingly, the present cannot appear as such under the substantive power of its own self-presence: it does not appear as present because it is present, front and center, in its own right; but rather, through its

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206 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 11.
207 Ibid., 13.
differential referral to the past and future which it is not. The present then, as

Derrida says with great consequence, must be divided “in and of itself.”

An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject.\(^{208}\)

Insofar, then, as the present is entirely dependent on that which it is not, it cannot be what it \textit{is}; it cannot be present in the metaphysical (\textit{ontotheological}) sense of the \textit{being present} of a being (\textit{parousia})—of a being that \textit{is there}, anchored in its presence and thereby able to anchor the present—to anchor the simple \textit{there} of what is there, here and now. On the contrary, divided in and of itself, the present can only come into its own through the ecstatic detour of differential reference; it can only return to its proper self (its identity) through the expropriation of distinguishing itself from that that which it constitutively \textit{excludes}. Different from itself within itself—within the \textit{essential} constitution of its very \textit{identity}—the present is thus always behind itself—forever delayed in its arrival to itself by virtue of the detour that is \textit{intrinsic} to its being what it \textit{is}. In itself, as itself, the present then is never present—neither spatially nor temporally; neither, that is, in the conscribed self-sameness of its identity nor in the timeliness of its own proper moment. Indeed, it is the warping of these two dimensions (of space and time) which points toward

\(^{208}\) Ibid.
their fundamental entanglement—toward what Derrida refers to as the “becoming-space of time” and the “becoming-time of space”—a warp through which is woven the very fabric of *différance*.

By the “becoming-space of time,” Derrida means to indicate the differential character of time—to indicate, as we’ve been describing, the manner in which the present is established through its contradistinction from the past and the future. Space here then refers to the system of borders that are used to distinguish differential elements within a given contextual field; such borders literally separate one element from another, like countries on a map. With respect to the “becoming-time of space,” Derrida intends to remark that in order for such spatial differences to function—in order, that is, for them to be able to establish identity through difference—they must be maintained across time such that each present moment contains a memory of the past as well as an anticipation of the future in order to appear *in itself* as that moment which is neither past nor future. The present, in other words, must involve a temporal synthesis or temporalization in a form similar to that originally conceived by Husserl in *The Phenomenology of Internal Time*.

Reflecting on this seminal piece of Husserliana in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida writes, “[o]ne then sees quickly that the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and
expectation (retention and protention).” In order to appear here and now, then, the present must reach out across the flux of time to moments that are neither here nor now; it must, that is, extend beyond its own proper time, dilating (or “thickening”) itself through the retention of the past and the protention of the future. Beyond the time of the present’s differential delay—of its spatial detour through the past and the future to which it stands juxtaposed—there is thus also the detour through time, through the temporalization holding these differential elements together. Taken in its breadth, then, the composite structure of this spatio-temporal amalgam further disaggregates presence from any proper self-containment, clearing the way for the never-presence of différance. As Derrida frames it:

it is this constitution of the present, as an "originary" and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, stricto sensu nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions (to reproduce analogically and provisionally a phenomenological and transcendental language that soon will reveal itself to be inadequate), that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-trace, or différance.210

Insofar, that is, as the present is originarily compound, its presence necessarily points elsewhere—toward the constituent parts out of which it is comprised—parts, in other words, from which it must therefore be derived. With regard to the present,

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210 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 13. To anticipate slightly, we will contend with the precaution—with the forewarning—about the inadequacy of phenomenological language a bit further below.
morever, the complexity of this aggregate structure is further compounded by the fact that the moments out of which it is comprised were or will themselves likewise be moments that refer to other pasts and futures in their own constitution. The site of the present then, its origin, is nowhere to be found as each here and now necessarily points toward alternate locations in time and space.

This thorough-going impropriety of the present provides a partial answer to Derrida’s self-addressed query:

How are we to think simultaneously, on the one hand, différance as the economic detour which, in the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation, and, on the other hand, différance as the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, and as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy?^{211}

On the one hand, it is only in the light of presence that the promise of the detour—of deferred arrival—can be made to appear; it is, in other words, only that which can be thought to possibly arrive, to be present as a present being, that can be expected to return (to come back into presence).^{212} On the other, insofar as presence is incessantly deferred—lost in its very arrival—that which underwrites the economics of return is itself given over to irrecoverable loss. Insofar, then, as presence appears, it makes the very promise of recuperation, of gainful return, possible; insofar,

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^{212} That, inversely, presence itself is grounded in return—through the logic of iteration—is something to which we will turn below, after an interval.
however, as this appearance itself emerges out of inexorable deferral, it likewise and at the same time inscribes any such gain with the underlying loss that supports it. It is in this sense and with regard to “the very project of philosophy, under the privileged heading of Hegelianism,” that Derrida remarks that “[c]ontrary to the metaphysical, dialectical, ‘Hegelian’ interpretation of the economic movement of différance, we must conceive of a play in which whoever loses wins, and in which one loses and wins on every turn.”213 Contrary, that is, to the restricted economics of dialectical thought—in which impropriety (i.e., the movement into exteriority) is conceived as a moment within an itinerary that returns to a more inclusive propriety—here we must envisage impropriety within each proper moment as the impossible condition of its very possibility. Here, in other words, loss cannot be made whole—cannot be appropriated within a context enriched through its comprehension; here, on the contrary, loss continues to bleed from the inside out—rupturing the very interiority that it makes possible. Rather than the proper boundlessness of an interiority knowing no outside that it cannot synthesize and make at home, here boundlessness slides ever outward in an infinite deferral that can never come in out of the cold to be at home with itself. Here, that is, the inside always turns toward an outside, which turns, in its turn, outside of itself in the perpetual deferral of the present to other presents, past and future. While within the embracing interiority of Hegelian dialectics, each step away, toward the outside,

213 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 19, 20.
is always at the same time a step back (just as any step away along a circular path is always likewise a step toward return)—here we step away from the circle entirely, away from the very figure of “good” infinity, toward something closer to a line, receding infinitely, “spuriously” on both ends. Rather than a loss or departure that is always at the same time the guarantor of return, here, then, we have only the returns of the guarantee—of a presence made possible through a deferral that forever promises but that can never deliver.

Still and in spite of its extending ever outward, this flattened arc of linear infinity does not go far enough. In failing, that is, to sufficiently distance itself from “true infinity,” it risks going too far—risks being subsumed within the economic loops of the Hegelian dialectic. As we noted above, superseding “spurious” infinity was a key motive force for the development Hegel’s dialectics. The type of infinity that simply adds on ad infinitum to the leading and trailing edges of the finite is, Hegel argues, in effect a negative infinity—that is, an in-finity defined by its perpetual negation of the finite; of a finitude that has not yet and never will arrive at the endlessness of the infinite. Such infinity, then, is already intimately, dialectically bound up with that which it negates. Furthermore, in order to be what it is—in order

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214 With regard to the circle and the line as figures of infinity, Hegel writes: “The image of the progress to infinity is the straight line, at the two limits of which alone the infinite is, and always only is where the line — which is determinate being — is not, and which goes out beyond to this negation of its determinate being, that is, to the indeterminate; the image of true infinity, bent back into itself, becomes the circle, the line which has reached itself, which is closed and wholly present, without beginning and end. Hegel, Hegel’s Logic (Greater Logic), §302.
to exceed the partiality of its negative determination—it must fully embrace this relationship to its other by negating the negation by which it is bound. Insofar, that is, as negatively conceived infinity is bound and determined by its relationship to the finitude that it negates, it likewise remains bounded—limited—by finitude itself; such infinity then will never be what it is—namely, infinite—as it will always be limited by the finitude whose border de-fines it. In order to escape the turns and returns of the economic, then, it is not enough to bend against the bending back of return. Remaining on the level of antithesis, such flattening easily springs back into its former loop, just like the negativity that we saw above to “always [be] the underside and accomplice of positivity.” On the contrary, in order to escape the economic, we must exceed the excesses of infinite deferral—digging into the depths of its furrows as opposed to merely pursuing its promises.

Earlier and en route to deferral, we cited Derrida as saying that “each element appearing on the scene of presence ... is related to something other than itself ... constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not....”\textsuperscript{215} What we left out, however, was what followed: “... by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or future as a modified present.”\textsuperscript{216} Derrida then continues (as is likewise cited above): “An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be

\textsuperscript{215} Derrida, \textit{Margins of Philosophy}, 13.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., emphasis added.
itself....” While on the one hand, then, Derrida aims to articulate the moment of synthesis—the disjunctive linkage of elements that undermine presence in constituting it (a disjunctive union that traces the line of the infinite regress rehearsed just above)—on the other, he is gesturing elsewhere—towards the interval that separates these elements. Though clearly these moments of linkage and separation are connected—as clearly there could be no linkage without separation—likewise and for the same reason, they are disjoint and thus point in different directions. It is for this reason that Derrida can at one moment “[propose to call] this constitution of the present, as an ‘originary’ synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions ... différance” while at the same time (albeit amid the brackets of parenthesis) preparing for a subsequent moment when such phenomenological language will fail—proleptically noting that to speak of such synthesis is “(to reproduce analogically and provisionally a phenomenological and transcendental language that soon will reveal itself to be inadequate).” Writing in this later moment (about a moment that soon will reveal its precedence), he states:

The structure of delay (Nachträglichkeit) in effect forbids that one make of temporalization (temporization) a simple dialectical complication of the living present as an originary and unceasing synthesis—a synthesis constantly directed back on itself, gathered in on itself and gathering—of retentional traces and protentional openings. The alterity of the "unconscious" makes us concerned not with horizons of modified—past or future—presents, but with a "past" that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a production or a reproduction in the form of presence.

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217 Ibid.
218 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 13.
Therefore the concept of trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming-past of what has been present. One cannot think the trace—and therefore *différance*—on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present.\(^{219}\)

Taking our time with this, we can begin to see the emergence of two times, at the same time, albeit “out of joint.”\(^{220}\) On the one hand, there is the synthetic time that *shows up* through difference—through the differential relationships that bind and separate the various moments of the past, present and future. Though in a certain sense (precisely in the sense of their infinite differential deferral) these moments will themselves have “never been present,” they do nevertheless present themselves as *such*—appearing beneath the broad light of phenomenological apperception precisely through the logics of temporal modification. Within the conjunctions of synthetic (phenomenological) time, in other words, the present shows up precisely through its differential relation to, for instance, the modified present of the past: it is only insofar as the past remains present—is *retained* within the present in the modified form of a present that no longer *is*—that it can serve as a differential marker offsetting and thereby giving form to the current, *living* moment of the present itself. Woven into the apparent but impossible time of

\(^{219}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{220}\) We are indulging a bit of anachronism here: Derrida refers to the Shakespearean figure of time being “out of joint” in a discussion of anachrony in the much later *Specters of Marx*. Continuing along these untimely lines, though, it is worth remarking a singular passage of *Politics of Friendship*, where Derrida writes: “But such a time gives itself in its withdrawal.... It delivers itself up and withdraws twice and according to two modalities, as we shall see, in two times as incompatible as they are indissociable.” Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997), 14.
synthetic temporality, however, is another register of time—indeed, one which has no registration at all beyond its trace in the synthetic trace that covers it up. In order for synthetic time—itself no more than a trace of infinitely deferred, differential traces—to show up in the first place, the moments that it links must first become divided—differentially separated, one from another. In order, that is, for the present to become apparent in its distinction from the past, it must first be separated from the past—from a present that no longer is and that, consequently, must have already slid out of the current frame of the present. Though apparent in retrospect—in the present retention of its having passed—the passage of the present into the past is nowhere to be seen. The interval, in other words—the time that intervenes between the past and the present—can only be traced after the fact, in the insuperable delay of Nachträglichkeit. This time, between times, thus can never be present or even presented. It comes, without being perceived, on the leading edge of the present and imperceptibly edges a new moment in while at the same time edging its predecessor out. Buried within the furrows of the synthetic moments to which it ineluctably gives rise, this time thus further breaches the

\[\text{221 Regarding the covering over of traces by traces, Derrida famously remarks the present as “a trace, and a trace of the erasure of the trace.” Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 24. The present, that is, is the differential marker or sign which marks the difference between that which is present and thus requires no sign—no placeholder to stand in its absence—and that which is absent and does. Deriving its significance from its difference from absence, the present thus marks a detour or differential trace; its power, however, derives from its erasure of this trace—its blotting out of the differential basis of its significance and thus appearing to be self-standing, indeed the very index of all that stands forth in its own right.}\]
economics of return—giving itself without ever being received; giving itself, that is, in the manner of a gift.

With the return of the gift, we can now wrap this long detour of the present back into the all-giving light from which we originally suspended it. Earlier, with respect to the all-giving, all-burning light, we noted its inexorable compulsion to give to the point of extinguishing itself. This fatal destiny of the all-giving light—this excess of pure loss in turning itself over to gainful return—charts the aporetic revolution of the gift; indeed, it is with respect to this light and its self-immolation that Derrida first remarks the logic of the gift. Taking the gift into account, he remarks,

the process of the gift (before exchange), the process that is not a process but a holocaust, a holocaust of the holocaust, engages the history of Being but does not belong to it. The gift is not; the holocaust is not; if at least there is some such. But as soon as it burns (the blaze is not a being), it must, burning itself, burn its action [opération] of burning and begin to be.  

222 The gift before Being to which Derrida here refers is the “the gift of the es gibt” from Heidegger’s Zeit und Sein. Reflecting on this gift, he writes, “[b]efore, if one could count here with time, before everything, before every determinable being [étant], there is, there was, there will have been the irruptive event of the gift [don].” 223 The resonances of this apparently discrete sentence are extremely complex, touching upon its surface, however, we can begin to trace the logic of the gift. In the first

222 Derrida, Glas, 242a.
223 Ibid.
instance, it is essential to note that the “es” of the idiomatic German expression “es gibt” (“there is” or “il y a,” in French), is not an it. As Heidegger remarks in On Time and Being and elsewhere, this it, which is not an it, not a being, is like the it in the expression “it is raining.”

Grammatically,” he writes,

a sentence consists of a subject and a predicate. The subject of a sentence is not necessarily a subject in the sense of an ego or a person. Grammar and logic, accordingly, construe it-sentences as impersonal, subject-less sentences.

The “es” of “es gibt,” then, is not a subject; here, that is, there is no giver giving, only the givenness of what is there, given over. The what that is given over, moreover, likewise is not. The gifts in the light of which Heidegger turns to the expression “es gibt” are the gifts of Being and time. Addressing these gifts, he writes, “[w]e say of beings: they are. With regard to the matter ‘Being’ and with regard to the matter ‘time,’ we remain cautious. We do not say: Being is, time is, but rather: there is Being [es gibt das Sein] and there is time [es gibt die Zeit].” Heidegger presents this caution after first remarking: “Being—a matter, but not a being. Time—a matter, but nothing temporal.” The absence of a copula in both of these remarks underscores what Heidegger refers to as the matter at stake: namely, that neither Being nor time are; that neither can be properly thought in the manner of entities.

225 Heidegger, On Time and Being, 18.
227 Ibid., 4.
What is at stake in the gifts of Being and time then is not some thing that can be given. On the contrary, these gifts only become perceptible as such, as beings, in the loss that constitutes their receipt.

Hidden in the folds of Derrida’s reference to the “event of the gift” is Heidegger’s concept of Appropriation—a concept derived from a loose etymological construal of the German word for event, Ereignis, in which Heidegger detects a sense of the word eigen, or proper. In the event [Ereignis] of the gift, Being and time are appropriated; they are taken up or received by the being for whom the presencing of Being is at issue, namely, man.228 In this appropriation, however, Being and time are likewise lost through the expropiation, or Enteignen, that Heidegger remarks as the corollary to Ereignis. According to Heidegger, Being and time allow for the presencing of entities by providing the opening within which temporal beings

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228 In his earlier work, Heidegger would have named Dasein here instead of “man” as that entity for which “Being . . . is an issue . . . in its very Being.” Heidegger, Being and Time, 67. Having shifted register by the time of On Time and Being, however, Heidegger here describes man as that being who, in order to be what he is (i.e., man), must stand “within the approach of presence . . . in such a way that he receives as a gift the presencing that It gives [es gibt] by perceiving what appears in letting-presentation.” Heidegger, On Time and Being, 12. Within this later formulation, two things are worthy of note: 1) the manner in which Being is determined as a “letting-presence”; and 2) the constitutive nature of the receipt of the gift. With regard to the first point, Heidegger writes, “[p]resence determines Being in a unified way as a presencing and allowing-to-presence.” Heidegger, On Time and Being, 12. With regard to the second, what is essential to keep in mind is that man does not pre-exist the receipt of the gift but is in fact constituted as such through it. The manner of man’s appropriation of the gift, then, is not that of one entity receiving another (which we will see, verges on the logic of exchange), but that of a relationship, a belonging, that precedes the togetherness of the entities that emerge out of it. The entities here, in other words, emerge out of the relationship rather than the reverse. For more on this conceptual inversion of belonging and togetherness, see Heidegger’s essay “Identity and Difference” in the book of the same name.
can come to be. Beings, in other words, are handed over to phenomenal apprehension through their becoming present in a temporal manifold of memory and anticipation that allows them to be identified as such—to be understood in the pre-conceptual manner of average, everyday being-in-the-world. In handing over such entities, then, Being and time are themselves held back or *epoche*. As Heidegger explains in numerous contexts, in order for Being to unconceal the beings that it allows to become present, it must withdraw or conceal itself; otherwise, its own revelation would cover over the beings that it serves to reveal.\(^{229}\) What is received with the gifts of Being and time, then, are not Being and time themselves, but rather, the entities which they allow to become present. It is this being lost immediately upon reception that, for Derrida, countersigns their status as gifts.

Taking up the gift of time, we can perhaps summarize the previous discussion in the following, more prosaic fashion: When a human being receives time, the time that she receives is not time itself but the temporal possibilities afforded by time—i.e., what can be done with it; the possibilities of its being spent. Time *is given*, it arrives (*il arrive*) without any sense of a giver and without any indication of its provenance. In its arrival—in the appropriation via which it becomes someone’s proper time (to dispense with as they see fit)—it loses its own proper sense: “time—nothing temporal” is transformed into the temporal itself, into the very substance of

temporal being-in-the-world. Time, then, has no giver and is irretrievably lost upon its receipt. It is in this way that, for Derrida, time strikes the very model of the gift.\footnote{That for Derrida, time has primacy over Being as the gift \textit{par excellence} can be understood quite naturally as an extension his prioritization of \textit{différance}. As we have seen, \textit{différance} rests heavily upon the temporal dimension of detour and deferral. For Derrida, moreover, “\textit{différance} in a certain and very strange way, (is) “older” than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being. When it has this age it can be called the play of the trace. The play of a trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of Being, but whose play transports and encloses the meaning of Being; the play of the trace, or the \textit{différance}, which has no meaning and is not.” Derrida, \textit{Margins of Philosophy}, 22.}

According to Derrida, “[f]or there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt.”\footnote{Derrida, \textit{Given Time}, 12.} He continues,

For there to be a gift, \textit{it is necessary [il faut]} that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt. Is [sic] is thus necessary, at the limit, that he not recognize the gift as gift. If he recognizes it as gift, if the gift \textit{appears to him as such}, if the present is present to him \textit{as present}, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent.\footnote{Derrida, \textit{Given Time}, 13.}

Even prior to and outside of the return of gratitude, \textit{simple recognition} suffices to bind the gift to the circuits of exchange that \textit{prescribe} its undoing. The mere recognition of the intention of the gift involves a giving back—an acknowledgement scripted in the contract of its very appearance: To perceive the gift \textit{as such} is to return the understanding of its \textit{having been given}; it is to notarize, by convention, the convention set in motion by the giving of the gift. The gift, in other words, can only appear where the laws binding its receipt (its perception \textit{as such}) precede and thereby preordain the manner of its reception. The reception of the gift \textit{as gift} thus
completes the contract of its being sent forth. Indeed, even prior to the reception by its intended recipient, the gift as gift will have already been received. The sender, in sending out the gift, will in short have already completed the circuit by receiving his intention to have given. The sender, that is, will have already been privy to the return of the gift even prior to its having been given out. It is for such reasons that Derrida cautions that “[a]t the limit, the gift as gift ought not to appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift. Neither to the ‘one’ nor to the ‘other.’”233 As soon as the gift is perceived, either by its sender or its recipient proper, it is received, captured, held onto as such. As such, it is held in reserve, held back from the giving—from the being given over to a giving with no view toward return—that had been its basis. Once it appears, the gift is lost. Though it “can certainly keep its phenomenality or, if one prefers, its appearance as gift . . . its very appearance, the simple phenomenon of the gift annuls it as gift.”234 The only gift that can remain a gift (though we must be on guard against guarding here) is thus a gift that does not show up, that cannot show up—such is the gift of time.

As we have seen, when time is received it is not time itself that is received but that which it allows to show up, namely, the temporal. Time then, remains a gift by remaining hidden behind what it sends forth. In its being received, it gives itself

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233 Ibid., 14.
234 Derrida, Given Time, 14.
over to that which can be received. Like the flame which “as soon as it burns . . .

must, burning itself, burn its action of burning and begin to be,” so too must the gift of time extinguish itself in the advent of the temporal to which it gives rise. But like the flame, just because it cannot not give itself over to that which can be taken up, it does, nevertheless, remain separate—held back, *epoche*. Though it gives rise to the perceptible, to the calculable economy of time, the gift of time remains imperceptibly outside of the economic—providing its resource, but never coming into account. Here, then, we are firmly back on the slippery ground of the *instant*. As we noted above, “the *instant*—the temporal mode of the sovereign operation—is not a point of full and unpenetrated presence: it slides and *eludes* us between two presences. . . . The instant is the *furtive*.” So too must the gift of time elude us. “For there to be gift event (we say event and not act), something must come about or happen, in an instant, in an instant that no doubt does not belong to the economy of time, in a time without time.” The gift of time must transpire; it must arrive in

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236 That the synthetic accounting of temporality is sufficient to unravel the gift of time is indeed underscored by Derrida: “The temporalization of time (memory, present, anticipation; retention, protention, imminence of the future; ‘ecstases,’ and so forth) always sets in motion the process of a destruction of the gift: through keeping, restitution, reproduction, the anticipatory expectation or apprehension that grasps or comprehends in advance.” Derrida, *Given Time*, 15.
237 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 263.
238 Derrida, *Given Time*, 17. Indeed, for the gift of time to be annulled, all that is required is that its reception last ever so slightly more than an instant: “For this destruction to occur, it suffices that the movement of acceptance (of prehension, of reception) last a little, however little that may be, more than an instant, an instant already caught up in the temporalizing synthesis, in the *syn* or the *cum* or the being-with-self of time. Ibid., 14.
order for there to be time at all. Absent this gift, one would have no time; but the
time that one has—the time within which one lives one’s life—is not the
imperceptible time of the gift but the time of perception itself—the phenomenal
temporality in which all that appears as such shows up. The gift of time thus entirely
“eludes us[,] between two presences”—between the moments of phenomenality to
which it gives rise. As gift, the pure aneconomics of its loss are given over entirely to
the economy that it sets in motion.239

Though the gift of time provides the basic resource for the economy of the
temporal, its donation cum investment does not end there. Coming between time—
between the moments of phenomenal temporality—the gift of time clearly buys
more time, adding on to the time that one has already had. On the one hand, then,
the gift of time drives the temporal economy precisely by fueling its continued turns
and returns—by fueling, that is, one’s re-turn to oneself in new moments suffused
with the possibilities contained within one’s temporal horizon. This hand—laying
down another stretch, linking one moment to the next—is the hand that we have
already seen, the hand giving forth while holding itself back. Looking into its self-
withholding, however, we can glimpse another hand that it lends to the turning of

239 With respect to this inertial donation of the gift, Derrida writes: “For finally, the
overrunning of the circle by the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple, ineffable
exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation. It is this exteriority that sets
the circle going, it is this exteriority that puts the economy in motion. It is this exteriority
that engages in the circle and makes it turn. If one must render an account . . . of the circle
effects in which a gift gets annulled, this account-rendering requires that one take into
account that which, while not simply belonging to the circle, engages in it and sets off its
the economy. In holding itself back, the gift of time not only links one moment to
the next, but likewise and at the same time decouples them. We noted earlier that
such decoupling is instrumental in the distinction of the present from the past that
precedes it. Though essential, such distinction is insufficient for the assertion of the
identity of the present; for in order for any mark of difference to effectively mark off
an identity, it must by its very nature be re-markable—that is, repeatable over time.
Echoing Saussure (who notably makes a similar point with respect to the writing of
the letter ‘t,’ which can likewise be written as ‘t’ or ‘T’ and remain recognizable),240
Derrida states the following:

When in fact I effectively use words, ... I must from the outset operate
(within) a structure of repetition whose basic element can only be
representative. A sign is never an event, if by event we mean an irreplaceable
and irreversible empirical particular. A sign which would take place but
"once" would not be a sign; a purely idiomatic sign would not be a sign. A
signifier (in general) must be formally recognizable in spite of, and through,
the diversity of empirical characteristics which may modify it. It must remain
the same, and be able to be repeated as such, despite and across the
deformations which the empirical event necessarily makes it undergo. A
phoneme or grapheme is necessarily always to some extent different each
time that it is presented in an operation or a perception. But, it can function
as a sign, and in general as language, only if a formal identity enables it to be
issued again and to be recognized. This identity is necessarily ideal.241

240 Ferdinand de Saussure, General Course in Linguistics, trans. Wade Baskin, eds. Charles
Saussure’s reference to “writing” is notable insofar as he overtly subscribes to the derivative
nature of writing with regard to speech. The metaphorical turn to writing here, in making
the case for distinguishing between audible “sound-images,” gestures toward what Derrida
claims as the essential nature of arché-writing for speech itself in Of Grammatology, “Part I:
Writing before the Letter.”
241 Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, 50.
It is on this basis and very much contrary to “Husserl’s express intention” that
Derrida argues that “[t]he presence-of-the-present is derived from repetition and
not the reverse.” The present, that is, in order to appear as such must repeat the
formally recognizable pattern that distinguishes it, for instance, from the past.
Rather than being experienced directly, without mediation, the present in other
words can only be experienced as such through reference to the repeatable
structure that makes it legible. That this is indeed the case extends from the fact
that what appears as the present is not the present itself but rather the appearance
of the present—a distinction, in fact, most fully rendered through Derrida’s
connection of Husserl with Saussure. In Of Grammatology, he writes:

The sound-image is the structure of the appearing of the sound [l’apparaître
du son] which is anything but the sound appearing [le son apparaissant] . . . The sound-image is what is heard; not the sound heard but the being-heard
of the sound. Being-heard is structurally phenomenal and belongs to an
order radically dissimilar to that of the real sound in the world. One can only
divide this subtle but absolutely decisive heterogeneity by a
phenomenological reduction.

By linking the Saussurian sound-image (or signifier) with the phenomenological
reduction of Husserl, Derrida here is arguing that the appearance of that which

\[\text{\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., 52; and again, similarly on page 68: “the presence of the present is thought of as arising from the bending-back of a return, from the movement of repetition, and not the reverse.” It is worth noting that through the use of the word “express” in the earlier citation, Derrida is playing on Husserl’s distinction between the “expressive” and the “communicative”—a distinction through which Husserl hopes to preserve the expressive immediacy of the “living present” from a communicative act that needs traffic through the aid of referential signifiers.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{243} Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 63.}\]
appears is grounded not in an empirical object but rather in the determination of that object through the formal distinctness or difference that allows it to appear as such. It is not then the object that impresses itself upon the senses, but rather, the way in which the object is rendered through its repeatable and distinctive form that makes it sensible. On the one hand, then, that which appears relies upon the repetition of its idealized form in order to appear at all; on the other, however, such ideality is itself predicated upon the repeated appearances of that which appears for its very ideality. Indeed, picking up from Husserl, Derrida argues that such repeatability (or iterability) provides the very basis of ideality. Commenting on Husserl’s conception of the ideality of objects, Derrida writes:

ideality, which is but another name for the permanence of the same and the possibility of its repetition, does not exist in the world, and it does not come from another world; it depends entirely on the possibility of acts of repetition. It is constituted by this possibility. Its "being" is proportionate to the power of repetition; absolute ideality is the correlate of a possibility of indefinite repetition. It could therefore be said that being is determined by Husserl as ideality, that is, as repetition.244

In a similar vein and echoing again the refrain from Saussure, Derrida, in Of Grammatology, writes:

A signifier is from the very beginning the possibility of its own repetition, of its own image or resemblance. It is the condition of its ideality, what identifies it as signifier, and makes it function as such, relating it to a signified which, for the same reasons, could never be a "unique and singular reality."245

244 Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, 52.
245 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 91.
In order, that is, for a form to function as an ideal, it must, from the outset, be independent of any particular instance of its appearance. Indeed, it must, in particular, transcend any such particularities in order to unite the diversity of instances across their differences—“across the deformations which the empirical event necessarily makes [them] undergo.” Ultimately, then, what constitutes the ideality of an ideal is precisely the fact of its repeatability across instances—the fact that it stands above and beyond any particular instance, as demonstrated by its constancy and applicability across instances. Such idealities, then, are transcendent insofar as they exceed any given empirical moment; insofar, however, as their transcendence rests upon their repetition (upon their consistent re-turn in experience) they remain inseparable from the empirical moments from which they must, nevertheless, remain divided.246 The ideality of these forms then is neither transcendental nor empirical—it “does not exist in the world, and it does not come from another world”; on the contrary, it resides in what Richard Beardsworth appositely refers to as a “middle ground”—a ground that provides the staging for “Derrida’s deconstruction of the empirico-transcendental difference.”247

246 In speaking of the empirical here, it is important to remain mindful that what is experienced are not objects in the world but perceptions shaped by the idealities that give form to sensibility.
247 Richard Beardsworth, Derrida and the Political (New York: Routledge, 1996), 16. Indeed, for an exceptionally cogent discussion of the link between Saussure and Husserl constructed by Derrida, see pages 12-17—a section that significantly inspired much of the preceding paragraph.
Having slid into ideality, it may appear that we have strayed from the economics of the gift of time; such, however, is far from the case. The gift of time is fundamental to any such ideality; indeed, it is only by virtue of its generous contributions to both sides of the ledger that such ideality is able to appear. On the one side—on the side of economy proper—the gift of time clearly provides for the very moment of the return. Each iteration—each moment in which an appearance returns, confirming and thereby establishing the trans-historical ideality of an identity—is, in other words, entirely brought about through the phenomenal receipt of the gift of time. On the other side—in the aneconomic column adding up losses that can never be accounted for—the gift of time provides for the very lapse from which returns are enabled to re-turn. Absent the non-temporal gap providing by the gift of time, new moments would never appear as such—would appear as new iterations of previously experienced differential forms. As we noted above, even the present would not appear as the present absent the “bending-back of a return, from the movement of repetition.”\(^{248}\) At bottom, there could be none of the identity-in-difference required by repetition were it not for difference—for new moments that are separated from their predecessors in such a way that their newness remains distinct. Ultimately, then, both hands of the gift of time are required for economy to receive its due. If the self-withholding of the gift of time were held back, then there would be no-thing to hold onto—no object secured in its identity by the repetition

\(^{248}\) Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 52.
that gives it form. It is in this way that the gift of time provides a more fulsome answer to

\[ \text{[h]ow [we are] to think simultaneously, on the one hand, } \text{différance as the economic detour which, in the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation, and, on the other hand, } \text{différance as the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, . . . and as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy.}^{249} \]

And further, to how in order to account for “the economic movement of différance, we must conceive of a play in which whoever loses wins, and in which one loses and wins on every turn.”^{250}

The fact that “one loses and wins on every turn” is seminal to the very project of deconstruction. That each construction—institution; constitution of identity—is at the same time predicated upon the impossibility that makes it possible—the lapsus of the gift of time; the infinite deferral that never allows it to stand on its own but that promises its arrival with each return—is precisely what opens each construction up to deconstruction. In other words, the fact that identity rests upon repetition means that, with each passing moment, the return that guarantees its stability likewise and at the same time exposes it to risk—to the risk of not being repeated; of being contaminated such that its return is not a re-turn but a transformation that belies its constancy, a mutation. Accordingly, Derrida contends

\[^{249}\text{Derrida, } \text{Margins of Philosophy, 19.}^{250}\text{Ibid., 20.}\]
that even that which appears most stable—most able to be counted upon—relies, in its turn, upon the ephemeral—upon the spectral, the mystical, upon faith.\footnote{Indeed, Derrida locates religion and faith even at the heart of the avowedly most self-assured knowledges of critical and scientific reason: “Henceforth religion ‘in the singular’ accompanies and even precedes the critical and teletechnoscientific reason, it watches over it as its shadow. It is its wake, the shadow of light itself, the pledge of faith, the guarantee of trustworthiness, the fiduciary experience presupposed by all production of shared knowledge, the testimonial performativity engaged in all technoscientific performance as in the entire capitalistic economy indissociable from it.” Derrida, \textit{Acts of Religion}, trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2001), 79.} With each iteration, faith (credit, belief) is extended in the hopes of its being returned, shored up by a next iteration whose passage is far from guaranteed. In order for this extension of credit to perdure across the impossible straits of such passage, it must rely upon that which can \textit{sur-vive} the \textit{untimely} death that is the void of all temporal possibilities—the “time without time” through which such passage is made. “Enter the ghost,” or what Derrida repeatedly refers to as the spectral.

A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present). We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time. Furtive and untimely, the apparition of the specter does not belong to that time, it does not give time, not that one: "Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost" (Hamlet).\footnote{Jacques Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of the Mourning, and the New International}, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), xix.}

The specter does not \textit{belong} to time—to the temporal worldhood of the phenomenal in which its apparition nonetheless appears. It \textit{does not exist} in the world, and it does not come from another world”; accordingly, it is another name for the ideal. This name, however, \textit{perhaps} more properly figures the impropriety of
ideality. The spectral is both familiar and unfamiliar—both of the home (the oikos) and the Unheimlich par excellence. The specter, in other words, is only recognizable in its coming back from a passing that nevertheless bars its full and proper return. The specter as specter returns; it is, as Derrida frequently refers to it, the revenant. Its coming back however is never complete. Just as with the ideal, the specter can never be fully materialized in any of the instances in which it appears; indeed, it is precisely this immateriality, this disembodiment, that accounts for its survival across the dead time of the “time without time,” of anachrony. In the perpetual semi-detachment of its haunting, the specter bodies forth the shade of identity such that the thread of the knowable may be faithfully retied (religare) on the other side of the anachronic void. At the leading edge of experience, the faith that is extended in the concrete—on the stable and consistent return of the knowable—is given over to the ghost—to the airy shadow upon which all that is constructed stands.

That the constructed rests heavily upon the ephemeral guarantees its perpetual lack of guarantee—its ineluctable openness to change. Earlier, we noted that this openness carries with it a certain risk. For Derrida, however, such risk does not entail the threat of violence, but rather, the very possibility of its minimization. According to Derrida, violence does not center on the violation (on the

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contamination) of the repeatable, but, on the contrary, on the violation of the
singular, violated in its uniqueness by its being brought under the mechanical rule of
systematicity. “To name,” he writes

such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a
difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the
unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the
arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of
self-presence. . . .254

For Derrida, however, such violence is ineluctable. As we have seen, in order for
anything to appear as such, even in the first instance, it must be marked off from
that which it is not; it must, in other words, already be inscribed in a differential
system that allows it to come forth, to emerge from an anonymous background
against which, absent the differential tracing of its outline, it would remain forever
lost, imperceptible. Indeed, according to Derrida, even “the proper,” the “absolute
proximity,” the “self-presence” that he refers to above originally emerge through
the differential trace of arche-writing. Filling out the ellipsis, he writes, “arche-
vioence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss
of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but
only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself
except in its own disappearance.”255 In other words, even the dream of an
unmediated, unnamed self-presence is marked from the outset by the différance
that gives it form. In fact, as we marginally noted above, presence itself is “a trace,

254 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 112.
255 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 112.
and a trace of the erasure of the trace.” Presence, in other words, is the differential marker of that which is not a trace: its identity as pure self-presence rests entirely upon its distinction from that which marks and stands in for an absence, namely, the trace. It is only in erasing, in blotting out this trace of the trace in contradistinction to which its identity is established, that the dream of uncontaminated self-presence can be dreamed in the first place—following, that is, the originary inscription that marks its loss or disappearance. For Derrida, then, violence is inevitable; this does not, however, mean that it cannot be minimized. Indeed, such is the very charge of taking the incalculable into account.

For Derrida, such impossible accounting is coextensive with the pursuit of justice and therefore with deconstruction itself. As we noted above, everything that is constructed is always at the same time deconstructible by virtue of the insuperable openness upon which it stands. So too, with law: “it is,” Derrida writes,

[the] deconstructible structure of law (droit) . . . that also insures the possibility of deconstruction. Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice.

Law, in the first instance, is deconstructible insofar as its inception can never be grounded upon anything legal. “Since the origin of authority, the foundation or

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256 Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, 24.
257 As will become clear, it is important to precaution that though impossible—that is, entirely outside of the horizons that constitute possibility—the “pursuit of justice” is not asymptotic, as in what Derrida frequently refers to as an Idea in the Kantian sense, otherwise known as a regulative Idea.
ground, the position of the law can't by definition rest on anything but themselves they are themselves a violence without ground.”

Far, however, from being a one-off event—a one-off assertion of force that gives itself over to the gentle persuasions of convention—Derrida argues that founding violence carries within it the inherent necessity of its own repetition.

I shall propose the interpretation according to which the very violence of the foundation or position of law (Rechtsetzende Gewalt) must envelop the violence of conservation (Rechtserhaltende Gewalt) and cannot break with it. It belongs to the structure of fundamental violence that it call for the repetition of itself and founds what ought to be conserved. . . . A foundation is a promise. Every position (Setzung) permits and promises (permet et promet), it positions en metant et en prometant. . . . Thus it inscribes the possibility of repetition at the heart of the originary. With this, there is no more a pure foundation or pure position of law, and so a pure founding violence, than there is a purely conservative violence. Position is already iterability, a call for self-conserving repetition. Conservation in its turn refounds, so that it can conserve what it claims to found. Thus there can be no rigorous opposition between positioning and conservation.

In order, that is, for a law to stand as a law—as an obligation that is legally binding in all of the instances that will fall within its jurisdiction—it must promise, pro-mettre, or put forward that it can be upheld across the diversity of instances with which it will be faced. A law, to be law, must be consistent, reliable, repeatable. Were it to change with each application, there would be no law, just the unforeseeable caprice of authority—just force, without law. The foundation of law therefore entails the necessary repetition through which it is conserved. For its part, conservation is

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259 Ibid., 14.
compelled to repeat the violence of founding in each instance of its application. Each iteration of law, each lawful adjudication, applies in a new and unique circumstance.

An address is always singular, idiomatic, and justice, as law (droit), seems always to suppose the generality of a rule, a norm or a universal imperative. How are we to reconcile the act of justice that must always concern singularity, individuals, irreplaceable groups and lives, the other or myself as other, in a unique situation with rule, norm, value or the imperative of justice which necessarily have a general form, even if this generality prescribes a singular application in each case? If I were content to apply a just rule, without a spirit of justice and without in some way inventing the rule and the example for each case, I might be protected by law (droit), my action corresponding to objective law, but I would not be just.\textsuperscript{261}

Though apparently justified (in each of its instances) by its precedents, such justification of legal adjudication fails to take into account the newness, the singularity of each instance of its application. It fails, that is, to take into account the incalculable—the unforeseeable uniqueness that could never have been pre-figured, calculated into the averages that constitute the norm. Accordingly, to the extent that law remains blind to the singularity of its applications—to the extent that it merely retains the good conscience of fulfilling its duty—it likewise remains blind to the demands of justice. As with the violence of systematicity we noted above, the rote, machinic application of law entirely violates the singularity of the individuals upon whom it is impressed. Reduced to instances of the universal, such individuals remain entirely foreclosed—shut out of the self-circling economy of legal iteration. To be sure, the demands of justice insist that judgments be rendered—for justice

\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 17.
deferred would be no justice at all. In order for such judgments to be rendered, however, they must likewise be rendered intelligible; they must, that is, be made to make sense, to show up in a universal form that can (at least in theory) be accessible and assessable by anyone. Accordingly, to the extent to which they must rise to the level of the universal, such judgments must necessarily fall short of the singular, of the incalculable, of justice itself. Violence, as we noted above, is ineluctable; one must win and lose on every turn. To the extent, however, that one endeavors to account for such violence—for the unfounded violation inherent in each and every application of law—one engages the possibility of minimizing that violence. By providing the leverage to prize open the apparent foreclosures of legal automaticity, “deconstruction is justice.” Barring the effort to take its impossible findings into account, any judgments, legal or otherwise, fail to rise even to the level of decisions.

According to Derrida, any decision made in the full light of knowledge is no decision at all. “A ‘responsibility’ or a ‘decision,’ he writes, “cannot be founded on or

262 Indeed, in contrast to the waiting imposed by the asymptotic infinity of the Kantian regulative idea or by a traditional conception of the messianic, Derrida insists upon the urgency of justice: “But justice, however unpresentable it may be, doesn’t wait. It is that which must not wait. To be direct, simple and brief, let us say this: a just decision is always required immediately, "right away.” Derrida, “Force of Law,” 26. The confusion about this urgency likewise informs many misreadings of Derrida’s notion of the to come, as a possibility infinitely deferred. We will see more of this to come shortly below. Indeed, for a critique of the regulative idea, in the context of the “to come,” see Rogues, 83-85.

263 With respect to the failure of the universal availability of a judgment to account for the singular, Derrida turns to Kierkegaard’s critique of the Hegelian ethical community, or Sittlichkeit, in Fear and Trembling. For more on Derrida’s reading of this problematic, see The Gift of Death, foremost, chapter 3.
justified by any knowledge as such, that is, without a leap between two discontinuous and radically heterogeneous orders.”\textsuperscript{264} While, he explains,

\textit{[i]t is necessary to know, to be sure, to know that knowledge is indispensable; we need to have knowledge, the best and most comprehensive available, in order to make a decision or take responsibility. But the moment and structure of the “il faut,” of the “it is necessary,” just like the responsible decision, are and must remain heterogeneous to knowledge. An absolute interruption must separate them, one that can always be judged “mad,” for otherwise the engagement of a responsibility would be reducible to the application and deployment of a program, perhaps even a program under the refined form of teleological norms, values, rules, indeed duties, that is to say; debts to be acquitted or reappropriated, and thus annulled in a circle that is still implicitly economic.}\textsuperscript{265}

A decision, in other words, fully encircled by the certainties of knowledge would entail no decision at all. On the contrary, such a “decision” would be entirely preordained—entirely pre-figured by a calculus that would, of necessity, have already predetermined the results. While, then, “knowledge is indispensible,” its dispensation can never fully account for a decision. Certainly, it must be gathered, collected, brought together (\textit{legein}) in order to be brought to bear; nevertheless, even the most rigorous consolidation of knowledge can never brook the gap that separates it from the uncertainty of the decision needing to be made. Were this gap ever to become bridgeable, then, no responsibility would be possible. In such a case, the “making of a decision” would be ceded to the algorithmic, machinic application of a set of rules; responsibility would thus be dissolved in systematicity. A decision,

\textsuperscript{264} Derrida, \textit{Rogues}, 145.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.
on the other hand, both calls for and constitutes singularity. As Derrida remarks:

“Just as no one can die in my place, no one can make a decision, what we call ‘a decision,’ in my place.” Insofar as a decision cannot be rendered programmatically, each instance of a decision is unique. One cannot, therefore, simply swap one person in for another and presume the same results; indeed, what constitutes a decision is precisely the foreclosure of such presumption. That a decision inscribes a singular responsibility within the one who makes it does not, however, mean that it emerges from an in-dividual; quite the contrary.

Indeed, for Derrida, any conception of a unified, undivided subject is entirely inadequate for conceiving the dynamics of a decision—a point he takes pains to emphasize in the simplest and most direct terms: “A theory of the subject,” he writes, “is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision.” Insofar, that is, as a decision remains inaccessible to the illuminating powers of knowledge, so too does it evade the grasp of any subject who would bring such powers to bear. A decision, in other words, cannot be made in the broad daylight of self-awareness; it cannot be made; on the contrary, it is made, passively.

[The passive decision] signifies in me the other who decides and rends. The passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, another event, a rending decision as the decision of the other. Of the absolute other in me, the other as the absolute that decides on me in me. Absolutely singular in principle, according to its most traditional concept, the decision is not only always exceptional, it makes an exception for/of me. In me. I decide, I make up my mind in all sovereignty—this would mean: the other than

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266 Derrida, Politics of Friendship, 68.
myself, the me as other and other than myself, he makes or I make an exception of the same. . . . This heteronomy, which is undoubtedly rebellious against the decisionist conception of sovereignty or of the exception (Schmitt), does not contradict; it opens autonomy on to itself, it is a figure of its heartbeat. It matches the decision to the gift, if there is one, as the other's gift.267

A decision, in other words, comes—il arrive in the time between time, between the moments of sovereign self-awareness. Like the gift of time and all of the furtive figures that we have followed into the contretemps—the “time without time,” the instant—the decision interrupts, it both disrupts and connects the phenomenal moments on either side of its passage. Certainly, one must know both before and after: before, insofar as responsibility demands that one have as much knowledge as possible when entering into a decision; after, insofar as a decision, to stand as a decision, demands that responsibility be borne. Nevertheless, in the midst of a decision, in the instant that Derrida frequently refers to as “madness,” there can be no knowledge, no self-awareness, no self.268 The instant of decision excepts one from oneself—it happens to oneself, in oneself, but not by oneself. Like the gift to which Derrida pairs it, the instant of decision can never be received. What can be received, what is received, is the decision having been made. A decision then, like the gift, can only be perceived after the fact, in its effects. It can, in other words, only be experienced in the après coup of Nachträglichkeit. On its own, in its own, “a

267 Ibid., 68-69.
268 Citing Kierkegaard, Derrida frequently makes reference to the madness of the instant of decision. Indeed, such references frequently bind the logic of the decision to the gift and vice versa, as, for instance, on page 65 of The Gift of Death and page 9 of Given Time.
decision is unconscious.” Beyond the reach of possibility, it is excepted from all sovereignty.\(^{269}\)

That the passivity of decision bars it from the powers of the sovereign exception does not, for Derrida, prevent its capacity for engaging the political. Indeed, contrary to the theological decisionism of Carl Schmitt, Derrida argues for a politics precisely predicated on the diremption of sovereignty. Whereas for Schmitt, that is, the indivisible, godlike powers of the sovereign emanate precisely from his capacity to except himself from any rules—to render decisions in complete autonomy—for Derrida, as we have seen, it is precisely the exception from rules that undermines any such pretence to autonomy.\(^{270}\) Accordingly, Derrida’s most explicit formulation of a politics circulates not around a unified head, but rather, around the oscillating turns and re-turns of circulation itself—around the alternating power of a force that must go out of itself in order to return to itself. It is along these lines, or turns, that Derrida frames his notion of a “democracy to come.”

In the first instance, Derrida suggests that democracy itself turns around the very model of self-possession—around a sovereign conception of self-rule.

\(^{269}\) Derrida, Politics of Friendship, 69.
\(^{270}\) Indeed, in contrast to the unified godhead that serves as the model of sovereignty, Derrida suggest something entirely otherwise: “In speaking of an ontotheology of sovereignty, I am referring here, under the name of God, this One and Only God, to the determination of a sovereign, and thus indivisible, omnipotence. For wherever the name of God would allow us to think something else, for example a vulnerable nonsovereignty, one that suffers and is divisible, one that is mortal even, capable of contradicting itself or of repenting (a thought that is neither impossible nor without example), it would be a completely different story; perhaps even the story of a god who deconstructs himself in his ipseity.” Derrida, Rogues, 157.
It seems difficult to think the desire for or the naming of any democratic space . . . without the rotary motion of some quasi-circular return or rotation toward the self, toward the origin itself, toward and upon the self of the origin, whenever it is a question, for example, of sovereign self-determination, of the autonomy of the self, of the ipse, namely, of the oneself that gives itself its own law . . . to speak in round terms, ipseity in general. By ipseity I thus wish to suggest “I can” or at the very least the power that gives itself its own law, its force of law. . . .

Democracy thus begins its revolution with an eye toward the economic par excellence—with an eye, that is, toward the perpetual return of the self-same; toward a power that always comes back to its source, defying any possibility of loss.

Like the self around which it turns, however, the circulation of democracy cannot help but be fractured. Just as with the divided I of the passive decision, so too must the very power, the possibility, the sovereign “I can” of democracy circulate through the im-possibility at its heart. In order, that is, for demo-cracy to preserve the power (force, kratos) of the people (demos) who are its origin and its end, it must preserve the power of each. Otherwise, its economic mission would entirely fail, as its return to its source (and resource) would be entirely choked off. Democracy, then, in order to function as demo-cracy must balance the self-rule, or freedom of each, against each other, equitably. Such is the golden rule of its economic calculus: each subject must count, equally. Such calculation, however, likewise and at the same time inevitably gives itself over to the incalculable; for the equality of freedom calls for alternation and with it, the unforeseeable possibilities of alterity.

271 Derrida, Rogues, 10-11.
Freedom and equality are reconcilable, so to speak, only in a turning or alternating fashion, only in alternation. The absolute freedom of a finite being . . . can be equitably shared only in the space-time of a "by turns" and thus only in a double circulation: on the one hand, the circulation of the circle provisionally transfers power from one to the other before returning in turn to the first, the governed becoming in his turn governing, the represented in his turn representing, and vice versa; on the other hand, the circulation of the circle, through the return of this "by turns," makes the final and supreme power come back to itself, to the itself of self, to the same as itself. The same circle, the circle itself, would have to ensure the returning to come but also the return—or returns—of the final power to its origin or its cause, to its for-itself.\footnote{272}

In order, then, for democracy to stay on track, it must turn itself over, with each iteration—at the end of each cycle of government—to the people from whom its authority springs. In each instance, between each instance, the result of properly democratic election returns can never be foreseen. It is in this way, at the very heart of its operation, that the calculable accounting of the democratic process opens itself up onto the incalculable itself. “Calculable measure,” Derrida writes, “also gives access to the incalculable and the incommensurable, an access that remains itself necessarily undecided between the calculable and the incalculable—and that is the aporia of the political and of democracy.” Aporetic at its heart, to remain self-same—within the circle of its own sovereign power—democracy must remain open to that which exceeds the horizons of foreseeable possibility. It must, that is, remain open to the im-possible, and it is for this reason that Derrida insists on referring to democracy as “democracy to come.”

\footnote{272} Ibid., 24.
Far from a license to perpetual deferral—to a putting off to another day in which the dream of democracy can at long last be realized\textsuperscript{273}—the “to-come” of democracy refers to the internal self-deferral of différance—to the deferral of any self-presence that could ever remain closed in on itself. “Democracy is what it is only in the différance by which it defers and differs from itself.”\textsuperscript{274} Democracy, in other words, is not; it is what it is only by virtue of its insuperable exposure to that which necessarily exceeds it—to the “undeniable . . . experience of the alterity of the other, of heterogeneity, of the singular, the not-same, the different, the dissymmetric, the heteronomous.”\textsuperscript{275} In-itself, for-itself, democracy thus can never have arrived. On the contrary, it must remain open, perpetually open to that which comes (à ce qui vient)—to a future à-venir; to a future, in other words, that is no mere modification of the present, but which remains entirely unforeseeable, beyond the horizons of expectation or possibility. It is only by virtue of this openness, this vulnerability, that democracy can be en-abled to heed the summons of the singularities that call to it. Such calls are urgent—they happen only once; in the absence of an urgent response, they are entirely foreclosed, as is the justice to which their calling is singularly linked. Responding urgently is thus the charge of the

\textsuperscript{273} With respect to the problematics surrounding the deferred realization of the ideal, see Derrida’s critique of the Kantian regulative Idea (as noted above) in Rogues, 83-85. In brief, however, it is worth mentioning here that for Derrida, any teleology necessarily forecloses that which it cannot foresee. Such foreclosure, in other words, necessarily shuts down any possibility of the coming of the im-possible.

\textsuperscript{274} Derrida, Rogues, 38.

\textsuperscript{275} Ibid.
to-come, its duty beyond duty and beyond any economic closure. Ultimately then, for Derrida, politics only become possible through the breach of the economic—through throwing open the doors of the oikos in an unconditional welcome to that which comes.\textsuperscript{276}

\textsuperscript{276} Unconditional hospitality is another figure of Derrida’s conception of the aporetic alternation between the economic and the im-possible. In order for hospitality to be hospitality, the host must be at home—ensconced in the mastery of self-possession. For hospitality to be unconditional, however, it must exceed the economic foreclosure, the horizon of possibility, of the host. Like democracy, then, in order to be at home with itself, hospitality must remain irrecusably open. For more, along these lines, see Derrida’s essay “Hospitality,” trans. Barry Stocker, Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities, 5, no. 3 (December 2000): 1-18, amongst other sources.
Chapter 4: Levinas

If Derrida can be seen as opening the door onto the political, Levinas, in turn, can be seen as stepping entirely out, as leaving the oikos fully behind. This stepping out, however, is not a step that one can take—not a step that is within one’s power; on the contrary, it proceeds from a drawing out, from a being drawn out. Rather than referring to the receptivity of an opening, such a leading step thus follows more properly on the order of susceptibility—on the order of an exposure that precedes one’s very self.

To be fair, such liminal crossings, from one side to the other of the threshold of the oikos, are multiple, crossing over and through one another. There are, for instance, numerous important occasions upon which Levinas beckons a welcome; and others, notably in the service of unconditional hospitality, where Derrida suggests a receptivity that exceeds all bounds of possibility, of the ipse at home with itself. Nevertheless, and despite these crossings over, it is our contention that bringing pressure to bear on the crux of the matter (perhaps even undue pressure) will serve to snap its pieces in two—revealing significant differences; indeed differences that signify and therefore open up new possibilities for an aneconomic politics.
**Pressing the Point**

Though our sympathies lie along the lines of a productive affinity between Derrida and Levinas, we will begin by pressing the point, indeed several points, of their seemingly greatest divergence—points raised in Derrida’s essay “Violence and Metaphysics.” In “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida brings a critical but sympathetic eye to Levinas’s first major work *Totality and Infinity*. On one side of the double-handed reading nicely framed by Simon Critchely, Derrida expresses admiration for the audacity, profundity and resoluteness of Levinas’s endeavor—an audacity of thought which he notes “can make us tremble”; on the other, however, he rigorously notes how precisely this same audacity destines such thought to be driven up on the shoals of the very shores from which it most aims to depart. In the broadest strokes, that is, Derrida claims that Levinas’s effort to escape from the Greek imperialism of the philosophical *Logos* is preordained to a certain failure precisely by virtue of its dependence on philosophical expression—on the very word of Greek philosophy, on the *Logos* itself. Empiricism, writes Derrida, “is the philosophical pretention to nonphilosophy.” In (as we shall see) endeavoring to rout(e) the comprehensive *interiority* of the Same through the radical *exteriority* of

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277 Indeed we are very much persuaded by readings of “Violence and Metaphysics,” such as those by Simon Critchley in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007).

278 Critchley, 13.

279 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 151.

280 Ibid., 81.
the Other, Derrida claims that Levinas is ultimately aiming at a form of empiricism—at a nonphilosophical philosophy that gestures toward an outside that philosophy itself cannot comprehend—that exceeds its proper domain. That in order to avoid the worst excesses of quietism—that is, in order to show up—such empiricism needs find expression in a coherent and comprehensible form prescribes its necessary failure. Citing an unnamed Greek, Derrida writes: “If one has to philosophize, one has to philosophize; if one does not have to philosophize, one still has to philosophize (to say it and think it). One always has to philosophize.”281 Of course, Derrida likewise notes that by calling his brand of empiricism metaphysics, Levinas remains keenly aware of his philosophical heritage. The problem, then, from Derrida’s perspective is not that Levinas is inattentive to the philosophical, but rather, that he remains profoundly incautious with respect to the effort needed to exceed the philosophical from within its own domain. Levinas, according to Derrida, remains bound and tied by a language that betrays his intentions. Such betrayal, moreover, is not confined to a manner of speaking, but infects the very substance of Levinas’s thought—leading it both to internal inconsistencies as well as to grave distortions of those against whom it is counterpoised. Indeed, for a philosopher committed to the notion that language precedes thought (a commitment which Derrida points out as one of the central problems for Levinas), the fact that his language so significantly undermines his thought is far from incidental but gestures

281 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 152.
toward the breaking point of that thought itself. On which side this breaking comes out will be something that we will endeavor to flesh out below in looking further into the substance of Derrida’s argument.

Of course, and as we have just noted with respect to the linkage of language and thought, the fleshing out of substance here is deeply enmeshed in form—indeed, in expression itself. One of the principle matters at issue here is how to express the inexpressible without violating the language that authorizes one to speak. According to Derrida, and in marked contrast to Husserl, with whom Levinas marks a specific site of contrast, Levinas falls very much short on this account.

But by acknowledging in this infinitely other as such (appearing as such) the status of an intentional modification of the ego in general, Husserl gives himself the right to speak of the infinitely other as such, accounting for the origin and the legitimacy of his language. He describes the phenomenal system of nonphenomenality. Levinas in fact speaks of the infinitely other, but by refusing to acknowledge an intentional modification of the ego which would be a violent and totalitarian act for him—he deprives himself of the very foundation and possibility of his own language.282

Breaking this down somewhat, what emerges are in fact two, inextricably intertwined issues: one, an expression of phenomenological possibility; the other, a question of expression in the face of the bracketing of such possibility. From a certain vantage, these two can be seen as wrapping around the singular question of the meaning of alterity. Channeling Parmenides, Derrida writes:

(1) The infinitely other, he would say perhaps, can be what it its only if it is other, that is, other than. Other than must be other than myself. Henceforth,

282 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 125.
it is no longer absolved of a relation to an ego. Therefore, it is no longer infinitely, absolutely other. It is no longer what it is. If it was absolved, it would not be the other either, but the Same. (2) The infinitely other cannot be what it is—infinitely other—except by being absolutely not the same. That is, in particular, by being other than itself (non ego). Being other than itself, it is not what it is. Therefore, it is not infinitely other, etc.

At bottom, we believe, this exercise is not just verbiage, or dialectical virtuosity in the "play of the Same." It would mean that the expression "infinitely other" or "absolutely other" cannot be stated and thought simultaneously; that the other cannot be absolutely exterior to the same without ceasing to be other. . . .

Here, then, we can see that the linguistic expressions “infinitely other” and “absolutely other” are doomed to a sort of internal incoherence that breaches the very logic upon which they are predicated. Very much in line with the différantial linguistic structure that we noted above, both terms, the “same” and the “other,” are mutually informing and thereby, at the same time, mutually deforming; neither, that is, can exist on its own, properly, in the absence of its other. In other words, in order for either to show up as such—to register within the coherence of meaningful discourse, of the philosophical logos—each must refer to the exteriority that defines its interiority or identity. Each must show up in its other. To invert a phrase, then, neither can “be absolutely exterior to the [other] without ceasing to be the [same].” By making room for the Other, the alter ego, within the phenomenological horizon of the intentionality of the ego, Husserl thus “gives himself the right to speak of the infinitely other as such”; by failing to do so, Levinas grants himself no

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283 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 126.
such right. Through his avowal of the *metaphysical desire* to separate the same and the Other across the insuperable expanse of the infinite or the ab-solution of ineluctable alterity, Levinas thus denies himself both the phenomenal and *logical* resources that would award him the right to speak—at least within a certain horizon—or, *perhaps*, more *properly*, a certain horizontality.

With a view toward this horizon, we noted in the previous chapter how for Derrida anything that appears *as such* is only able to do so by virtue of the *différential* relations that distinguish it from that which it is not. Following Derrida’s adaptation of Saussure, that is, we traced the field of structural differences that enable all articulation, signification and conception. Accordingly, on our first pass over this field, we remarked how “each element appearing on the scene of presence . . . is related to something other than itself.”284 Further, we noted how such differentiation requires the phenomenological horizon of temporal synthesis: how, in order for a given present element to stand in contradistinction to its absent others, it must retain a *trace* or “memory” of those others within its very constitution. It was along the lines of this second (albeit interlaced) horizon that we then began to see the breakup of the first through the rupture of its very synchrony. On our second pass over the field of differences, that is, we noted how the synthetic temporality that holds it together must necessarily be scored by an alternate temporality which provides for the synthetic precisely by breaking its moments

apart. Following Derrida (and prior to wrapping it in the logic of the gift), we described this alternate temporality as referring to “a ‘past’ that has never been present”—a formulation which Derrida borrows unabashedly from Levinas. While on the one hand, this recourse to Levinasian language betrays the sort of sympathy between Derrida and Levinas that we noted above, on the other, it gestures

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285 While in the 1964 essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” referring to the same formulation of the trace in Levinas’s “The Trace of the Other,” Derrida is foremost concerned with the phenomeno-logical perplexities of a concept that must betray its nonphenomenological meaning to show up, in the 1967 essay “Différance,” he appears more disposed toward the nonphenomenal possibilities that it reveals. Writing in “Violence and Metaphysics” about the linguistic problematic of the trace, which (like the phenomena which it is used to frame, namely, the alterity of the Other) can only appear in contradistinction to that which it is not, Derrida remarks: “If it is called ‘trace,’ the word can emerge only as a metaphor whose philosophical elucidation will ceaselessly call upon ‘contradictions.’ Without which its originality—that which distinguishes it from the Sign (the word conventionally chosen by Levinas)—would not appear. For it must be made to appear. And the phenomenon supposes original contamination by the sign.” Derrida, Writing and Difference, 129. By this analysis, the trace is tied to other words and could not appear as such absent in these relations. The trace, that is, must bear within it a trace of the sign which it is not, and in so doing, function as a sign or as a trace of the erasure of the trace of the sign—i.e., as that which “stands on its own,” “in contradistinction to” the sign, by virtue of its erasure of this contradistinction that makes it stand and, consequently, stand for or in place of a deferred trace that could properly stand on its own, independent of any such contradistinction. Writing in “Différance,” on the other hand, Derrida takes a different look at the trace. Rather than conceiving it as an element within a phenomeno-logical system of appearance, he considers it along the lines of its phenominal impossibility as the temporal in-between or spacing that makes the system itself function. Describing its phenomenal ex-ception, he writes: “The concept of trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming past of what has been present. One cannot think the trace—and therefore différance—the basis of the present or of the presence of the present.” Derrida, Writing and Difference, 21. A past that has never been present: this formula is the one that Levinas uses, although certainly in a nonpsychoanalytic way, to qualify the trace and enigma of absolute alterity: the Other. Within these limits, and from this point of view at least, the thought of différance implies the entire critique of classical ontology undertaken by Levinas. While this endorsement is by no means unqualified, it does “at least” suggest Derrida’s estimation of the importance of the nonphenomenal phenomena around which Levinas’s project is framed. While in the earlier piece, Derrida’s key concern in this regard surrounds the linguistic problems that impact upon the phenomenal ability of the trace to show up, here he seems much more
toward an alternate reading of the “phenomenon” of alterity—one which plainly breaks with the synthetic horizon of temporality. Conceiving the Other on the basis of this alternate temporality, of the time in between time and not within the synthetic horizon of temporality, it becomes possible to envisage the Other not as an other appearing within the light of contradistinction but precisely as breaking with light altogether, as rupturing the very horizon of the phenomenal. That this nonphenomenal phenomenon necessarily precedes any modification of the ego that would come to pass in its nachträglich aftermath not only breaks with the phenomenal but likewise, at the same time, points toward an unauthorized language that serves as its basis. It is in turning toward the manner of this broken tongue that we will attempt to address some of Derrida’s principle concerns in “Violence and Metaphysics,” specifically surrounding presence, in-finity and exteriority.

Given his own critique of the logos in its auto-affective resonance with presence, it is unsurprising that one of Derrida’s chief concerns in “Violence and

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286 For the most extensive formulation of Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence implied by the spoken word, see Of Grammatology, “Part I: Writing before the Letter.” The
Metaphysics” centers on Levinas’s insistence upon the presence of the Other for signification. Working through Levinas’s corpus he writes,

The other is not signaled by his face, he is this face: “Absolutely present, in his face, the Other—without any metaphor—faces me.” The other, therefore, is given “in person” and without allergy only in the face. . . . The face is presence, ousia.

. . . The face does not signify, does not present itself as a sign, but expresses itself, offering itself in person, in itself, kath’ auto: “the thing in itself expresses itself.” To express oneself is to be behind the sign. To be behind the sign: is this not, first of all, to be capable of attending (to) one’s speech, to assist it, according to the expression used in the Phaedrus as argument against Theuth (or Hermes)—an expression Levinas makes his own on several occasions. Only living speech, in its mastery and magisteriality, is able to assist itself; and only living speech is expression and not a servile sign.287

Reflecting on this commentary, he continues:

Is “oral discourse” the plenitude of discourse? . . . Is the “frankness” of expression essentially an aspect of living speech for him who is not God? This question is meaningless for Levinas, who conceives the face in terms of the “resemblance” of man and God. Are not weight and magisterial instruction an aspect of writing? Is it not possible to invert all of Levinas’s statements on this point [emphasis added]? By showing, for example, that writing can assist itself, for it has time and freedom, escaping better than speech from empirical urgencies. That, by neutralizing the demands of empirical “economy,” writing’s essence is more “metaphysical” (in Levinas’s sense) than speech? That the writer absents himself better, that is, expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech? And that, in depriving himself of the enjoyments and effects of his signs, the writer more effectively renounces violence?288

question of auto-affection, however, can also be seen in Derrida’s critique of Husserl in Speech and Phenomena, where (apart from an explicit treatment of the phonocentrism of consciousness on page 79), Derrida points out that even the apparently pure auto-affection of speaking to oneself entails the indirection of speaking through the structural idealities of signs (as described in and around the passages cited above from page 50).

287 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 100-101. For more on the Platonic critique of writing cited here, see “Plato’s Pharmacy” in Disseminations.
288 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 101-102.
At issue here, for Derrida, is the manner in which the insistence on presence undermines the demands of alterity. Without going beyond the most superficial gloss on Derrida’s critique of the logos, what concerns us here (and what concerns Derrida) is the manner in which the auto-affection—the “hearing oneself speak”—of the spoken word traffics in the currency of unadulterated presence; playing off of its proximity to presence to mind—to the unity of thinking with the thought that it thinks. Ultimately, this presence to mind backs up into the Godhead, in which thought thinking itself is both the essence and the origin of the entirety that emanates from it. That a certain theos lays in wait behind the logos brings for Derrida the entire weight of the critique of onto-theology to bear upon Totality and Infinity. That for Levinas, in other words, written discourse would represent a derivative form—a fallen form, divorced from the living presence which it imperfectly charades—suggests for Derrida the linkage of Levinas’s work with the entire chain of emanation descending from Plato. If, that is, for Levinas writing suggests a secondary form, a copy of speech which is in turn a copy of thought, then this relegation implies the entire tradition extending from the privileging of presence. Backed into the purity of the Godhead, presence guarantees the truth that it serves. The divine thinking itself models the very essence of indivisibility: insofar as what is is what it is by virtue of being so in the absolute immediacy of divine thought, the Godhead provides no room for duplicity or slippage between signifiers
and signifieds—the two are one in a presence without time; absent any before or after that would provide ingress for even the slightest grain of corruption. The divine word of the *onto-theo-logos*, then, is that of a “majesticality” whose *mastery* is grounded upon a presence that brooks no disjunction. It is strange then, from this perspective, from Derrida’s perspective, that a philosophy of ab-solute alterity, of ineluctable separation, would through the privileging of living speech align itself with a tradition bound to seamless unity. “Is it,” then, “not possible to invert all of Levinas’s statements on this point?”289

Along similar lines, Derrida likewise questions Levinas’s resurrection of the word “exteriority” in *Totality and Infinity*—a raising up that lifts the word to the level of the book’s very subtitle, *An Essay in Exteriority*. As Derrida remarks, Levinas had previously eschewed “exteriority”—a term whose spatiality condemns it to a privileging of unity prior to the separation that it ultimately aims to *articulate*.290 Exteriority, in other words, remains bound to that which excludes it: to be properly exterior, the outside must remain commensurate with the inside that bars and thereby defines it; the two, that is, must be united within the horizon that defines them through their mutual exclusion. Derrida notes that “Levinas . . . intends to show that *true* exteriority is not spatial,” but how—in the face of the mandatory presence of the Other—can the Other be present as Other without being spatially

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290 Ibid., 112.
exterior? If the Other that is, must be present and must, at the same time, remain Other, then how can this be apart from the spatial exteriority that separates what has already been brought together (namely, in presence)? Furthermore (and this brings us to the final bone with which we are going to contend), how can the Other be infinitely Other in the midst of an exteriority that de fines it precisely through the limitation that divides it from the Same? According to Derrida, this would only be possible if infinity were understood in its negative signification, literally as in-finite, as the non-finite. As Derrida observes, however, Levinas specifically precludes this possibility by insisting upon the positive infinity of the Other. How then, can the Other, who must be present, be positively infinite without being limited by the finitude of the Same whose identity specifically and by de-finition excludes It?

In the midst of these paradoxes—of a present and infinite alterity that excludes both exteriority and the negative dimension of in-finity—Derrida contends that we find ourselves on the shoals of logical expression. Typically, he argues, such fracturing would lead to something akin to the poetics of negative theology or a “philosophy of intuitive communion”—a philosophy that “gave itself the right to travel through philosophical discourse as through a foreign medium.”291 “Language being defined as a historical residue,” by such modes of thought, “there was no contradiction in using it, for better or worse, in order to denounce its own betrayal, and then to abandon it to its own insufficiency as rhetorical refuse, speech lost to

291 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 116.
metaphysics.” As Derrida remarks, however, such an aporetic course remains entirely impassible for Levinas. Insofar as Levinas argues that language precedes thought, he cannot, at the same time, argue for the inadequacy of language to convey a certain thought, for such an argument would clearly indicate an extra-linguistic thought that precedes language and overwhelms its mediocre and subordinate carriage. According to Derrida, then, Levinas not only denies himself the right to speak in the authorized tongue of the *logos* (like Husserl), but likewise denies himself access to the heterological speech of intuitionists (like Bergson or mystics). How then are we to hear what Levinas has to say?

As suggested above, the answer lies in listening to the *vouloir-dire* of Levinas’s conception of language. According to Levinas, language is “a relation in which the terms *absolve* themselves from the relation, remain absolute within the relation.” Earlier, we remarked the difficulties of ab-solution within the synchronic horizon of linguistic structuration. We noted that terms can only find their determination, their definition, within a relation that defies all absolution. Here, however, the terminology is very different: for Levinas, what is meant by *terms* are not the elements within a linguistic system, but rather, the interlocutors themselves who comprise and are comprised by the self-absolving relation of language itself. Rather than abiding within the same plane, such inter-locutors remain held in

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292 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 116, original emphasis.
293 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 64.
suspension between the two points of their locution. Indeed, any shared plane, any plane that comes to be held in common between them, presupposes such prior suspension, for any such commonality can only be “posited in a discourse, in a conversation [entre-tien] which proposes the world. This proposition is between [se tient entre] two points which do not constitute a system, a cosmos, a totality.”

Prior to any systemativity—to any plane that could grant two interlocutors a common footing—there precedes a suspension in which each is irremissibly exposed to the other. Systematicity itself, then, can only be grounded upon such suspension. And it is here, from this vantage, that we can approach one of the resonances of “standing behind the sign” that we noted above, with Derrida.

According to Levinas, such standing is necessary for the very commencement of language. In expressing himself to the same, the Other not only pro-poses the substance of his expression, but at the same time expresses himself—expresses himself as the one standing behind the sub-stance that he puts forward. Quite independent of the substance of that proposition, the Other, in other words, presents himself through its very presentation as the one who presents it. Though the substance of the presentation may be deceitful or dissimulated, the manner of its presentation—its delivery by the one who delivers it—never can be.

Expression does not consist in giving us the Other's interiority. The Other who expresses himself precisely does not give himself, and accordingly retains the freedom to lie. But deceit and veracity already presuppose the

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294 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 96, original emphasis and bracketed French.
absolute authenticity of the face—the privileged case of a presentation of being foreign to the alternative of truth and non-truth, circumventing the ambiguity of the true and the false which every truth risks—an ambiguity, moreover, in which all values move. The presentation of being in the face does not have the status of a value. What we call the face is precisely this exceptional presentation of self by self, incommensurable with the presentation of realities simply given, always suspect of some swindle, always possibly dreamt up. To seek truth I have already established a relationship with a face which can guarantee itself, whose epiphany itself is somehow a word of honor. Every language as an exchange of verbal signs refers already to this primordial word of honor. The verbal sign is placed where someone signifies something to someone else. It therefore already presupposes an authentification of the signifier. 295

Through the reflexivity of self-presentation implicit in any verbal discourse, the Other cannot help but sign his “word of honor” beneath the substance of whatever it is that he says. Though the content of his speech may be deceitful, his saying of it never can be. 296 This impossibility of covering himself up, of hiding himself in the midst of the self-manifestation that accompanies any act of expression, is what Levinas means when he refers to the nudity and destitution of the Other in his appeal to the same. 297 In expressing himself to the same, the Other denudes himself

295 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 202.
296 “It is the frank presence of an existent that can lie, that is, disposes of the theme he offers, without being able to dissimulate his frankness as interlocutor, always struggling openly [à visage découvert]. The eyes break through the mask—the language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble. The eye does not shine; it speaks. The alternative of truth and lying, of sincerity and dissimulation, is the prerogative of him who abides in the relation of absolute frankness, in the absolute frankness which cannot hide itself.” Ibid., 66.
297 “To speak to me is at each moment to surmount what is necessarily plastic in manifestation. To manifest oneself as a face is to impose oneself above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation, the very straightforwardness of the face to face, without the intermediary of any image, in one’s nudity, that is, in one’s destitution and hunger.” Ibid., 200.
entirely, gives himself over beyond all possibility of cloaking.\(^{298}\) The unimpeachable authenticity of such expression—its “primordial word of honor”—is essential to the very commencement of language, for in its absence, the very givenness of the given could never take root. “To receive the given is already to receive it as taught—as an expression of the Other.” Though as we have seen, in expressing himself the Other “does not give himself”—does not give the content of his interiority—he does, however, give the very givenness of his giving. Insofar as he cannot step away from the self-presentation of his expression, he cannot \textit{but} stand behind that which he puts forward—that which he gives as something \textit{meant} to be taken. What is taken in through such giving then is something more than that which is received. Beyond and quite apart from any content conveyed, there lies the trace of the passage of the conveyance itself. That which was pro-posed was put forward, put forward by the one who ineluctably stands behind it. What is taken in with the proposition then is a gesture that points back toward its having been put forward—a gesture, in other words, that gestures back toward its very givenness. That that which comes forward was indeed \textit{put forward} is the very rudiment of signification. That \textit{this} was placed \textit{here} points irrevocably elsewhere—back beyond its simple immediacy, toward the reason for its having been placed—toward the purpose or \textit{meaning to be} which it signifies. Absent the putting forward, the proposition of the Other, there would be

\(^{298}\) “The nakedness of the face is not what is presented to me because I disclose it, what would therefore be presented to me, to my powers, to my eyes, to my perceptions, in a light exterior to it. The face has turned to me—and this is its very nudity. It \textit{is} by itself and not by reference to a system.” Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 74-75.
no looking behind, for the very givenness of the given would never appear.

Moreover, barring his denuded self-exposure, the Other could never be read into or deduced from his artifacts, “[f]or deduction is a mode of thinking that applies to objects already given. The interlocutor can not be deduced, for the relationship between him and me is presupposed by every proof.”

Beyond “the alternative of truth and non-truth,” the unadornably nude self-expression of the Other is the very first word of language; without this “primordial word of honor,” foreign to all dissemblance, the very givenness of the given could never be signed.

Though the signing of the given rests upon a self-attendance that defies all possibility of dissimulation, this does not however weld it to the ontoselrelogics of pure presence. Indeed, the self-same resource that guarantees such presence undermines it, utterly, at the same time. To this point, we have focused primarily on the relational aspect of the “relation in which the terms absolve themselves from the relation”; we have focused, that is, on the passage or passing that permits a form of bridging between the terms of the relation—between its interlocutors. Now, however, we will have to turn to more properly face the dimension of ab-solution.

As we noted above in remarking a point on which Derrida is entirely correct, “[t]he face does not signify, does not present itself as a sign”; well, perhaps not entirely correct. What is right here is that “the face . . . does not present itself as a sign.” The face, in other words, does not stand in for or re-present an absent other; it is not a

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299 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 92.
substitute that gestures back toward that for which it holds a place. As we have
seen, in the face of such absence there could be no face, for the face is what it is
only by virtue of its ineluctable presence—only by virtue of its utter incapacity to
back away from itself. Accordingly, the face could never be a body double, a stand
in, without reverting to the mere plastic form of a mask. The face, then, is no sign;
it does, however, signify—indeed, it is the signifier par excellence. And here we
come close to the heart of the matter—to the heart of Levinas’s linguistic theory and
to the manner in which presence and absence are mutually imbricated in the face.

According to Levinas, the face signifies insofar as it expresses itself—insofar,
that is, as it delivers signs, puts them forward, pro-poses them. Such signs, however,
do not, indeed cannot, signify the signifier.

The meaningful refers to a signifier. The sign does not signify the signifier as it
signifies the signified. The signified is never a complete presence; always a
sign in its turn, it does not come in a straightforward frankness. The signifier,
he who emits the sign, faces, despite the interposition of the sign, without
proposing himself as a theme. He can, to be sure, speak of himself—but then
he would announce himself as signified and consequently as a sign in his
turn. The Other, the signifier, manifests himself in speech by speaking of the
world and not of himself; he manifests himself by proposing the world, by
thematizing it. 301

As we saw in the previous chapter, concepts signified within a synchronic linguistic
structure, as proposed by Saussure, are mutually referential. Each refers to its others
and thereby declines any possibility of autochthonous self-presence. Signifiers

300 As is the case with the “face” of a cadaver: “The dead face becomes a form, a mortuary
mask; it is shown instead of letting see—but precisely thus no longer appears as a face.”
Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 262.
301 Ibid., 96.
within such a structure are likewise self-deferring—each standing on its own only by virtue of the differences that allow for its distinction from its compeers. For Levinas, however, the signifier is *altogether different*, in a word, *toute autre*. Rather, that is, than a differential marker pointing toward a differentially marked concept, or signified, for Levinas the signifier is the *giver* of signs—the one who issues them or puts them forward. For Levinas then a sign does not serve to signify a concept—to render it intelligible through the linkage of signifier and signified; on the contrary, it functions as the medium through which the signifier signifies. In delivering signs, in proposing them, the signifier signifies his capacity for signification. In so doing, he does not, as we have seen, deliver himself over in his interiority. Though he may, as Levinas notes, “speak of himself” and thereby constitute himself as a theme, the substance of such signification is of an entirely different order than the signifying act that subtends and enables it. Again, though the substance of his speech may be dissimulated, his saying of it never can be. In speaking, then, the signifier gives himself over not as the content of his propositions, but as their site of provenance, as the *origin* from which they issue forth; if he is given away by his signs, it is thus as their giver, their *signifier*, and not as their signified.  

302 Such giving, however, can never be properly received. Though the substance of his speech—the signs delivered, signed over by the signifier—can be received, the giving of it never can be.  

302 “He who signals himself by a sign qua signifying that sign is not the signified of the sign—but delivers the sign and gives it.” Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 92.
The signifier cannot deliver himself of his capacity for delivery, for signification, as all of his deliverances precisely presuppose and indeed entail such capacity. The signifier, in other words, could never expropriate himself of his capacity for signification in order to hand it over as the substance of his interiority, for even in the midst of such a hand off he would, of necessity, retain his capacity for handing over—for giving or signifying. In giving, then, the signifier always holds onto his capacity to give; he keeps it in hand precisely through the exercise of using it to hand over.  

His giving, then, can never be taken away from him, for it can never be handed over. Accordingly, it can never be taken in, or received, as it is not a property of the given but of the giver giving, actively, inalienably. Again, we see that giving requires the unequivocal presence of the one who gives, who stands behind while putting forward; we also, however, can begin to perceive the imperceptible that stands in the face of giving.

On the one hand, in standing behind that which he puts forward, the signifier signs his word of honor to that which he gives. Accordingly, such signing requires the irrecusable attendance of the signifier—his undeclinable presence in the straightforward nudity of the face. On the other, however, the hand whose ineluctable withdrawal we have just traced, the self-same putting forward requires that the signifier stay behind—that he remain irretrievably behind that which he

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303 Here, then, we are very close to the logic of the gift encountered in the previous chapter, particularly with respect to Derrida’s uptake of the Heideggerian language of the “to khreon.”
puts forward. Here then, in this second sense, remaining behind is not the stalwart backing up of attestation, but rather, the ab-solution of a behind that can never come forward—that can never deliver itself, for what it is in-itself as itself is precisely the archic capacity to put forward or pro-pose. Altogether otherwise than conventional terms, for Levinas the signifier is thus not de-termined through conventions of relational distinction. Indeed, according to Levinas such distinction would entirely undermine the very distinctiveness of the signifier—his ab-solution from the one to whom he signifies—for it would necessitate a common ground through which the terms divided are in fact united along the very border that separates them. In order, that is, for terms to be mutually de-termining, they must inhabit a common plane through which the occupancy of one term confines and thereby delimits its other. As Levinas frames it: “Limitation is conceivable only within a totality where the parts mutually define one another. . . . The limit separates and unites in a whole.”304 Such wholes in-form the conventional conception of signifiers. For Levinas however, as we have remarked, the signifier is nowise a conventional marker, but rather, the one who gives signs, who issues them. Accordingly, he is not defined not by any pre-existing relation but, entirely to the contrary, inaugurates the very possibility of relation precisely through the self-same capacity that ultimately absolves him of its grasp. “For language,” writes Levinas, “can be spoken only if the interlocutor is the commencement of his discourse, if, consequently, he remains

304 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 222.
beyond the system, if he is not on the same plane as myself. In order, that is, for
language to emerge, the signifier must stand behind his signification as its origin, or
arche. In so doing, he thereby absolves himself of the very relation that he erects. As
one who can posit and put forward—who can, and by definition must, set discourse
in motion—the signifier, in announcing himself, announces an insuperable alterity
that is what it is not because of what it is not—not because of its distinction from
that to which it becomes related only by virtue of its relating itself, by virtue of its
self-expression; on the contrary, what is announced is that which announces itself:
namely, an alterity that is otherwise precisely by virtue of its capacity to put
forward, to posit and propose, prior to and independent of any reception that
succeeds it. To put a finer point on it: the Other qua signifier is not Other because he
is not the same but is not the same because he is Other—prior to and outside of any
distinction that his pronouncement would subsequently permit. The alterity of the
Other then is by no means the fruit of negation—of an otherness that is nothing
more than the consequence of being other than; indeed, such de-termination, such
relational negation, emerges precisely from positivity—from the positive capacity to
put forward, to posit, that such relationality necessarily presupposes. Such then is
the positive basis of the alterity that gleams in the face of the Other—an alterity
that extends without end along the very lines of its absolution.

In contrast to negative formulations of the in-finite, the infinity of the Other proceeds without end by virtue of its endless capacity to begin. As with his alterity, the infinity of the Other in other words does not emerge through the negation of its contrary: the Other is not infinite by dint of his negative relation to finitude, or boundedness. On the other hand (and in complete consonance with Derrida’s observations), the Other could not overrun the border that divides him from the same without ceding his alterity in the name of a broader totality that would encompass both parties, both terms, without distinction. Still, as we have just seen, such distinction or de-termination is not the basis but the consequence of a relation that proceeds from an altogether different positivity—from a putting forward, or a pro-position. As with distinction, then, so too with infinity: the Other is not infinite because he exceeds the finite but because in order to be what he is he must forever retain the capacity to propose, to posit, to begin anew. The Other qua Other is a bottomless wellspring—an archic source that can only be what it is to the extent that it never runs dry.\footnote{Were the well to run dry, were the Other to die, he would cease to be Other as such; on the contrary, he would be reduced to the mere plasticity of the funerary—an artifact assemblable within the synchronic horizon of the natural, the material.} Indeed, such boundless capacity for commencement is the very basis of the Other’s breach with totality—with the world as such, inasmuch as it can be assembled, comprehended, understood. In the world of things, causes can be traced back from effects, but there can be no trace of the trace of transcendence—of the trace that traces back without ever finding its term.
What preserves the precise signification of the trace in regard to each trace of an empirical passage (over and above the sign which it could be, [sic] is not possible except insofar as it is itself in the trace of this transcendence. This position in the trace . . . does not begin in things, which by themselves do not leave traces, but produce effects, i.e., remain in the world. One stone scratches another. The scratch can of course be taken for a trace; in reality, without man who holds the stone, the scratch is only an effect. Further, it is less a trace than the burning woods is the trace of the lightning bolt. Cause and effect, even separated by time, pertain to the same world. Everything in things is exposed, including what in them is unknown: the traces which mark them are all part of this fullness of the present; their history is without a past, Trace as trace does not only lead into the past. It is the passage itself toward a past which is farther removed than any past and from any future, a passage which is still taking place in my time. 307

In the natural world, the world of physis, causes, even hidden causes, can be tracked down—made to appear within the phenomenal light of a present that assembles the past and future within its glimmering horizon. The past that begins with a beginner, however, can never be made to appear; its cause can never be traced. This is not just the result of the asymptotic nature of the search, but of a dimensional shift. Contrary, that is, to Derrida’s surmise—“Does not ‘infinitely other’ primarily signify that which does not come to an end, despite my interminable labor and experience?” 308—the infinite alterity of the Other cannot be measured by an endless pursuit that forever remains forever behind a quarry that infinitely outpaces it. It is not here a question of a trail that leads right up the one leaving tracks—a trail upon which the pursuer necessarily trails for having started behind a pursued that remains

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308 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 114.
in perpetual motion, apace. For such to be the case, the pursued would merely have to differ in degree from his cold trail—to remain just steps ahead of the steps that he leaves behind. Here, however, the pursued, the Other, is nowhere to be found within the plane of his tracks. By virtue of his perpetual capacity to begin again, the Other, in other words, is nowise confined by that which he has done before. His next step can lead anywhere, as long as he is the one taking it, setting it forth. The attempt to predict the Other is thus precisely the effort to reduce him of his alterity—to reduce his actions to a legible mechanics that de-termine and in-form them. The Other, however, *qua Other* precisely exceeds all such determination. His actions can never be reduced to the physics of cause and effect without absolving him entirely of his alterity—without, that is, absolving him of his capacity to set things in motion, to be a beginning, and not simply a link in a chain of events that begins and ends elsewhere. Such a chain would simply bind him, inextricably, to a system that knows no absolution, separation or alterity—he would be no more than a cog in a machine from which he could never be prized. To be Other, then, the Other must stand apart from any such determination—from any determination that would subsume and encompass him. It is precisely in this sense that Levinas refers to the *relation* with the Other as a metaphysical relation—as a relation with that which exceeds the determining or determinable laws of *physis*.\(^{309}\) It is, moreover, on these

\(^{309}\) “The so-called ‘objective’ nature of the entities that would appear outside of this ‘curvature of space’—the phenomenon—on the contrary, would indicate the loss of metaphysical truth, the superior truth. . . . This ‘curvature of space’ expresses the relation
grounds that the trail of the Other crosses over the path of Kantian autonomy—albeit obliquely. For Kant, moral agency requires that one be free of any extrinsic determination that would impinge upon one’s ability to legislate for oneself. To be properly self-ruling, in other words, one must be free from any foreign influence that would govern one’s decisions and thereby overrule one’s self. Autonomy thus requires freedom from all heteronomy—from all laws that come from an other; from any other; even from one’s own unchosen desires.\footnote{310} In this case, however, it is precisely the heteron qua Other who eschews all external legislation.\footnote{311} The Other as Other, as arche or originator, can never be bound or determined—can never to be

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\footnote{310}{For a shorthand reference to the Kantian distinction between autonomy and heteronomy, see the second section of the \textit{Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals}.}

\footnote{311}{With respect to the phenomenal determinism of \textit{physis} and its noumenal contrary, see “The Critical Elucidation of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason,” in Kant’s \textit{Critique of Practical Reason} where, among other things, he remarks: “If one takes the attributes of the existence of things in time for things in themselves, which is the usual way of thinking, the necessity in the causal relation can in no way be united with freedom. They are contradictory to each other, for the former implies that every event, and consequently every action which occurs at a certain point of time is necessary under the condition of what preceded it.” He continues, “Consequently, if we wish to still save it [freedom], no other course remains than to ascribe the existence of a thing so far as it is determinable in time, and accordingly its causality under the law of natural necessity, merely to appearance, and to attribute freedom to the same being as a thing in itself.” Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Practical Reason}, trans. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 99. Reading the \textit{in-itself} along these latter lines of its independence from determinism casts a useful light upon Levinas’s conception of the Other as \textit{kath’ auto}—as an in-itself that starts out from \textit{within} itself in such a way that bears no inscription, no prescription. Indeed, in a doubled crossing, it is worth noting that for Levinas it is the ethical encounter with the Other, \textit{kath’ auto}, that marks the sensible opening to the metaphysics of reason rather than the sensible apprehension of reason in the guise of the sublime that lays the groundwork for ethics, as in Kant. Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 79.}
reduced to or deduced from his effects. Such impossibility, moreover, is not a result of radical dissemination—of an endless dispersal of meaning that flows ever outward, thereby thwarting all command. On the contrary, it extends from the fact that that which has been put forward is always already left behind. As we have seen, in expressing himself the Other always stands behind that which he pro-poses. Accordingly, he always retains the capacity to put forward otherwise, anywise, unforeseeably. His infinition then is not the result of his illegibility, but precisely the reverse: the Other cannot be read because of his endless capacity to begin something new. Contrary, then, to Derrida’s suggestion that the writer better absents himself than the orator, it is only ever the orator who really absents himself, precisely through the unpredictability of his self-presentation. The writer, for his part, simply fails to appear at the summons of the reader—a summons that already takes aim at his reduction, at the deduction of his meaning, or worse, at his elision in a taking up that never exceeds its own capacities and which thereby papers over any

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312 We noted earlier that in the first instance the interlocutor, the Other, could not be deduced from his effects, for such deduction already presupposes the givenness of a giving that can only succeed the giving of the Other: “The phenomenon is not deduced from him; one does not rediscover him by tracing back from the sign the thing would be to the interlocutor giving this sign, in a movement analogous to that leading from the appearance to things in themselves. For deduction is a mode of thinking that applies to objects already given.” Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 92. What is given, however, also misses the point of the giving—of the sending that put it forth: “The author of the work, approached from the work, will be present only as a content. . . . To ask what is to ask as what: it is not to take the manifestation for itself.” Ibid., 177. It is along these lines that Levinas rejects the effort to reconstitute the Other from his works. Indeed, we will see in the constitution of such assembly the effort that Levinas characterizes as the endeavor to synthesize the time of the Other (diachrony) in the synchronic dimension of a presentable history, or book.
hint of alterity. Infinity then, at least in the first instance, is not about reception—about the failures or im-possibilities of finitude—but rather, about the excesses of a presence that withdraws in the very face that it puts forward.

In the first instance, yes. The first instance, in other words, is a moment of positivity—the result of a positing or putting forward that wells up endlessly in the unfathomable face of the Other. There is, however, a second moment—or more properly, a second time—“my time,” as Levinas refers to it above. In this time, there is a moment for negation—for an undoing that succeeds what has been done. This moment follows its predecessor just as Levinas, following Descartes, argues that finitude follows the infinite. “In returning to the Cartesian notion of infinity, the ‘idea of infinity’ put into the separated being by the infinite,” he writes, “we retain its positivity, its anteriority to every finite thought and every thought of the finite, its exteriority with regard to the finite.” The Cartesian notion to which Levinas here returns extends from a passage in the Third Meditation in which Descartes writes that

there is manifestly more reality in the infinite substance than in the finite substance, and my awareness of the infinite must therefore be in some way prior to my awareness of the finite, that is to say, my awareness of G-d must be prior to that of myself. For how could I know that I doubt and desire, i.e., know that something is lacking to me and that I am not wholly perfect, save by having in me the idea of a being more perfect than myself, by comparison with which I may recognize my deficiencies.

313 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 197.
314 quoted in Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 211, translation in note 3.
Descartes continues along this meditative line to suggest that the only way for the finite to have an idea of the infinite is for the infinite to have placed the idea of itself within the finite; otherwise, the finite would have absolutely no means of conceiving an idea that wholly exceeds it, for even the negation of its finitude would require the notion of its finitude—a notion which, Descartes contends, could only succeed from its prior conception of infinity. Accordingly, and concordantly with Levinas’s uptake of its logic, the very thought of finitude could only ever follow from the positive introduction of the infinite itself. Finitude, that is, only learns its limits—that it is indeed limited, finite—in the face of the infinite itself. Any negation that succeeds this lesson, then, does so only in the aftermath of its pro-position. In effect, the same learns the lesson of its finitude only through a putting forward that places it in relation with that which exceeds all relation—with that which absolves itself of all relation precisely through the movement that proposes the relation in the first place. The same learns—or more properly, is taught—the lesson of its finitude by a reaching out that overreaches it—that sur-prises it, that overtakes it, above and beyond its capacity to take in or comprehend (comprendre). This outreach, or signification, places the same in touch with a site that bears no vision. Insofar as the movement of signification proceeds from the Other,\textsuperscript{315} it begins in a beginning that

\textsuperscript{315} It is worth noting here that not only does the initial movement of signification, of language, begin with the Other, but so too do any subsequent moments: One can only discourse with one who has already revealed his presence as one with whom one can engage—i.e., with one who has already signified his capacity for signification.
exceeds all recollection and anticipation—begins, in other words, in “a past that is more distant than any past and than any future.” The relation with the Other—the “relation in which the terms absolve themselves from the relation”—thus exposes the same to the utter absolution of the unforeseeable. Speaking of the ethical resistance posed by the Other, counterposed, that is, to the imperializing efforts of the same, Levinas writes:

But he can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very unforeseeableness of his reaction. He thus opposes to me not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole, but the very transcendence of his being by relation to that whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence.

Insofar as he is the source of his own movements, the archic force of the Other can never be assembled within the phenomenological horizon of the same. His time necessarily exceeds “my time” with all of its pretensions to retention and protention. His movements begin in “a past that has never been present” and emerge from a future that can never be assumed, presumed or taken on as an extension of any presentable present, of “my time.” The signification of the Other thus places within the same a site of unforeseeability. Precisely through his proposition, he positions or places within the same a positivity that exceeds any

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317 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199, original emphasis.
319 For more on this radical future that exceeds all presumption, see Levinas’s *Time and the Other*. 

comprehensible limit. It is, then, in the effort of comprehension—of the taking in of that which has been put forward or given—that the same is exposed to both his finitude and its negation. As we saw earlier, in taking the given in, the same, at the same time, likewise receives the trace of the giving that subtends it. Faced with this trace, leading interminably back to a behind that can never come forward, that can never be taken in, the same is thus pressed against the inner walls of his own interiority. In his efforts to make sense of the Other, to absorb that which exceeds his comprehension, the same, in other words, comes up against the very boundaries of his finitude—against these boundaries, moreover, at precisely the moment of their rupture, of their explosion from the inside out; like a hypotonic cell that bursts upon absorbing too much water. The same thus learns the lesson of his finitude only in the face of an overwhelming positivity—of a positivity that exceeds his incapacity and thereby breaks it down in the midst of its very revelation. If there is a moment for negation, then, for the work of undoing, it is less a moment of in-finity than of an infinity that pushes the finite beyond its bounds, past its breaking point, positively.

Per Descartes and Levinas following, then, the finite and its undoing can only ever succeed the overwhelming excess of positive infinity. Indeed, for Levinas such overwhelming is the very index of the eidos of infinity. “The idea of infinity,” he remarks, is constituted by “the overflowing of finite thought by its content”;320 framed slightly otherwise, it is “the distance between the ideatum and the idea here

320 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 197.
[that] constitutes the content of the *ideatum* itself." The idea of infinity, then, is in-itself outside itself—the trace of an excess that can never be contained. As such, it is an idea that can never be *had*, that can never be held onto or possessed—an idea, consequently, that can only ever be taught.

Insofar as the *idea* of infinity requires, indeed is composed of a superfluity, it can never be contained. Infinity, in other words, is a lesson that can never be learned, absorbed or domesticated—a lesson that can never be brought *home* from the agora. Were it otherwise, were infinity capable of containment, then it would, by definition, through its finition, be other than it is. Such comprehensible *infinity* could, after all, only ever be finite—a figmentary fragment, entirely bereft of the substance of its *hyperstasis*. Contrary to the simple negation of finitude—to the endless application of endlessness to ends; an application in which both the formula (the *not yet*) and its input (any conceivable end) can be readily apprehended beforehand—the infinity that comes before the finite can only ever come to mind in the midst of its *coming before*; in the midst of its placing itself in front of, or facing the finite. Contrary, that is, to the in-finity that be opened endlessly in the midst of the finite, through its negation or undoing, the infinity that exceeds the finite does so precisely by coming before it from a time that precedes its time and endlessly retains its capacity for such precedence precisely through its ability to *come*

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321 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 49.
322 Here a reference to the Height of the Other, standing ineluctably above the same in the very figure of transcendence.
before—to put itself forward or pro-pose itself. The infinity that comes before the finite then cannot simply place itself within the finite, statically, once and for all, for its very infinity rests precisely upon its coming before—upon the outward extension that it sets in motion, unforeseeably, beyond any perceptible horizon that would coincide with the confines of the finite. Though the lesson of infinity then cannot be learned or mastered, it can be taught, and indeed, only appears in the midst of such teaching. Far from a matter of adequacy—from any coincidence of appearance or intention with a truth that subtends it—the lesson of infinity is precisely the lesson of inadequacy.323 As such it requires the teaching of one with whom the same is not equal, with whom the same cannot be equal; it requires the teaching of a master, of the Other. “Teaching,” writes Levinas, “is a discourse in which the master can bring to the student what the student does not yet know. It does not operate as maieutics, but continues the placing in me of the idea of infinity.”324 A bit further on, he continues:

The idea of infinity in me, implying a content overflowing the container, breaks with the prejudice of maieutics without breaking with rationalism, since the idea of infinity, far from violating the mind, conditions nonviolence itself, that is, establishes ethics. The other is not for reason a scandal that puts it in dialectical movement, but the first teaching. A being receiving the

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323 Along these lines, in the preface to Totality and Infinity, Levinas writes, “intentionality, where thought remains an adequation with the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level. All knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently non-adequation.” He continues, “The incarnation of consciousness is therefore comprehensible only if, over and beyond adequation, the overflowing of the idea by its ideatum, that is, the idea of infinity, moves consciousness.” Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 27, original emphasis.

324 Ibid., 180.
idea of Infinity, *receiving* since it cannot derive it from itself, is a being taught in a non-maieutic fashion, a being whose very existing consists in this incessant reception of teaching, in this incessant overflowing of self... To think is to have the idea of infinity, or to be taught. Rational thought refers to this teaching.  

The idea of infinity, then, is coextensive with a teaching that proceeds from the ineluctable exteriority of radical alterity. As an idea *defined* precisely by its excess over the thought thinking it, infinity could never have a domestic provenance. Infinity, in other words, could never have derived from the *one* thinking it; it could never have been there, dormant, merely awaiting recollection or delivery through the practiced midwifery of a teacher bringing a hidden potential to light. The idea of infinity is no one’s potential; indeed, its very substance measures the absence of potency, of capacity or capability of the one within whom it is *placed*. The idea of infinity thus requires a teacher not merely for casting a light upon hidden depths but precisely for producing such depths through the implantation of inexorable excess within a container that can in no way contain it. Accordingly, in order for its lesson to be imparted, such teaching must by definition be *incessant*. Such teaching, in other words, requires the incessant intro-duction of the greater into the lesser; it requires the perpetual putting forth of the excessive. Absent such putting forth, or

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325 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 204, original emphasis. It is worth noting that what was left out here, covered over by ellipsis is “time.” For Levinas, as we have seen, time is the relationship with that which exceeds the horizons of the self—“a past that has never been present” and a future that does not extend as a continuation of the present. As we will see, it is also this relationship with time *qua* the infinitely Other that opens the possibility of reflexivity in which the self, separated from itself can reflect back upon itself in a way that opens it up to rational thought.
proposition, there could be no excess, for, as we have seen, whatever learning could
be held onto could nowise rise to the level of the infinite as its very capacity for
comprehension would bar its standing above and beyond the finite. The lesson of
infinity thus requires a teacher, a master, present in the face of his teaching. Quite
apart from Derrida’s suspicions of oratorial mastery then, for Levinas, mastery is less
about adequacy than its converse—about the teaching of an insuperable inadequacy
that can only be made manifest in the face of the one whose propositions announce
it. Speech, he remarks, “brings what the written word is already deprived of:
mastery. Speech, better than a simple sign, is essentially magisterial. It first of all
teaches this teaching itself, by virtue of which alone it can teach (and not, like
maieutics, awaken in me) things and ideas. Ideas instruct me coming from the
master who presents them to me.”326

As noted above, the substance of such teaching is “nonviolence itself,” or
ethics. Such substance, however, is not comprised of the content conveyed through
the medium of teaching but is the very lesson of the teaching itself. In the face of its
facing, teaching teaches the insuperable heights of exteriority. Teaching, that is,
teaches the same of an exteriority that he can never internalize. Though of course,
and as we have said, this lesson is at once a lesson of limits—of a finitude exposed in
the face of that which it cannot comprehend—it is not a limiting lesson, but rather,
an expansive one—an explosive one, extending the horizons of the same beyond the

326 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 69, original emphasis.
limits of mere horizontality. As has been frequently remarked, the same and the Other do not, cannot, occupy the same plane. It is in this sense that Levinas refers to the metaphysical *height* of the Other, who “comes from on high” and in so doing effects a “curvature of intersubjective space.”327 The fact that the Other is on a separate, parallel plane answers again to the question of a positive infinity that is without end but that does not encompass entirety itself: there can after all be infinite, infinite planes, stacked without intersection on a line that itself knows no bounds; it also, however, answers to the lack of any shared border along which the Other could limit the same in his own, proper terms. The Other does not limit the same but rather exposes him to the limits of his own horizon of possibility. The two, that is, are not arrayed along any common, contested ground to which both could wish to lay claim. There is no battle here, no bellicosity, nothing which would permit Levinas to inscribe the encounter within what he refers to as a philosophy of war.

Here there is only a challenge, a question brought to a violence previously unbeknownst to itself.

The calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the Other in the face, we call language. The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching. Socratic maieutics prevailed over a pedagogy that introduced ideas into a mind by violating or seducing (which amounts to the same thing) that mind. It does not preclude the openness of the very dimension of infinity, which is height, in the face of the Master. This voice coming from another shore teaches transcendence itself. Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced, to then teach: teaching is its very production. The first

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teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical. In this commerce with the infinity of exteriority or of height the naïveté of the direct impulse, the naïveté of the being exercising itself as a force on the move, is ashamed of its naiveté. It discovers itself as a violence, but thereby enters into a new dimension. Commerce with the alterity of infinity does not offend like an opinion; it does not limit a mind in a way inadmissible to a philosopher. Limitation is produced only within a totality, whereas the relation with the Other breaks the ceiling of the totality. It is fundamentally pacific. The other is not opposed to me as a freedom other than, but similar to my own, and consequently hostile to my own. The Other is not another freedom as arbitrary as my own, in which case it would traverse the infinity that separates me from him and enter under the same concept. His alterity is manifested in a mastery that does not conquer, but teaches. Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality.\footnote{Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 171.}

By imparting height, teaching teaches the very transcendence of the horizontal. It teaches, in other words, the possibility of the impossible, of the incomprehensible itself. It does so, moreover, not by contesting comprehension in its own terms, but precisely by exceeding these terms—by remaining radically and inexorably apart from them. The teaching of teaching then does not confront the same—hemming him in by virtue of an overmatched force; on the contrary, it sur-prises him through its infinite withdrawal—through a withdrawal that imposes no force whatever, but more nearly the opposite—more nearly a vacuum that draws the same along \textit{through} the inner surface of his own comprehension. It is then precisely because the same and the Other share no border that the face of the Other is able to conduct the same beyond his bounds. Again we see that limits here only come into view by virtue of the wholesale lack of limitation—by virtue of infinity itself. Faced with an
excess that he can in no way comprehend, the same is embarrassed by the naïve presumption of his own capacity. Indeed, such presumption is operative in the very failure that imparts the lesson of excess. It is only in the effort to take in that which has been put forward that the same is enabled to rise beyond the limits of the horizontal and catch a trace of the ideatum that entirely outstrips, indeed transcends, its idea. It is here, then, on the threshold of freedom, in the movement of a taking in, that the surprise is transformed into a welcome—opening the door to the phenomenological problematics that Derrida pointedly remarks.

That the exercise of freedom and its foreordained failure is engaged here is far from incidental; on the contrary, it is conditioned by the very elements from which the pre-ethical subject lives. Prior to the ethical encounter, Levinas describes the same as living from the substance of the elements in which he is immersed. In direct contrast to the tool-driven pragmatics of being-in-the-world, as conceived by Heidegger, Levinas argues that the living from which flows from the element is a mode of satisfying nourishment, of enjoyment. “Nourishment, “ he writes, “... is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized . . . as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation.”\(^{329}\) Living from the element, in other words, involves an ingestion—an in-corporation—that relishes its very act. The

\[^{329}\text{Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 111.}\]
world in which one is immersed remains, by definition, external. But such exteriority is nothing adversarial, nothing to be worked over; on the contrary, it forms the basis of a genial dependency in which the world gives me the very air I need to breathe. Once I have taken this air in, it becomes my air—the sustaining, elevating pleasure of a breath. Far from a projective design on the world, living from is in this way a respiration. Indeed, even in work given over to a specific end, Levinas argues that the process of the work itself produces an affectivity that fleshes out the very substance of the living of life—the pain or enjoyment of the doing. “The enjoyment of a thing,” he writes, “does not consist simply in bringing this thing to the usage for which it is fabricated—the pen to writing, the hammer to the nail to be driven in—but also in suffering or rejoicing over this operation.” In filling out this affective register, the taking in of living from sets the stage for the ethical encounter along two, intertwining channels: both by fostering the separated interiority of the same and by offering a path for ingress into this interiority.

With respect to the nurturing constitution of interiority, Levinas contends that the affectivity of enjoyment is the very basis of the ipseity of the pre-ethical self. Just as the Other can never be reduced to an other—to an instance of a genus—without being reduced of his very alterity, without, that is, being precomprehended within the bounds of type, so too must the same be reserved from the immersive confines of the generic. In order, that is, for the same to

330 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 113.
encounter the Other qua Other, he must experience the Other as coming to him in a
singular way—in a way that cannot be distributed, shared or diluted, but that
requires his singular response. After the ethical encounter, it is this singularity of
response—of a responsibility for which no one else can answer that forms the basis
of the ipseity of the same; prior, however, such ipseity can only be rooted in the
goic enjoyment of a taking in that cannot be shared. “The I,” writes Levinas,
is not unique like the Eiffel Tower or the Mona Lisa. The unicity of the I does
not merely consist in being found in one sample only, but in existing without
having a genus, without being the individuation of a concept. . . .
This logically absurd structure of unicity, this non-participation in genus, is
the very egoism of happiness. 331

In the taking in of living from, the pre-ethical subject becomes possessed of an
affectivity of which it cannot be dispossessed. Its enjoyment is what it is only in the
unmuddled immediacy of the experience of it; whatever of this experience can be
communicated can only ever amount to a description, not to the affective feeling
itself. The affectivity of enjoyment is thus purely private, singular and unique. 332
Such incommunicable singularity deepens the inscription of the separation between
the same and the Other—encircling the same within an interiority that is no more
accessible than the radical exteriority of the Other. In order to make room for the
ethical encounter, then, Levinas argues that the interiority of the same must, after a

331 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 117-118.
332 along the lines of the purely privative interiority of pain noted above, originally with
respect to Arendt but likewise and by extension with respect to the relentless assaults of
competition.
fashion, become externalized. It is in this way that the *oikos* proper, or dwelling, enters onto the scene, albeit problematically.

According to Levinas, the dwelling amounts to a reflective withdrawal (*un receuillement*) from the immediacy of immersion within the *element*. In effect, this stepping back involves a dilation in time. Rather, that is, than being directly immersed within the element—in the immediacy of an enjoyment that only knows itself in the very midst of its unfolding—the dwelling entails the delay of preparation, of a making ready *aforehand* with an eye toward future enjoyment. In pulling back, then, the dwelling marks the extension of interiority into the outside world. The space that it makes ready between the exteriority of the element and the immediate interiority of enjoyment is storage room—a staging area for an enjoyment to come in which items removed, or harvested, from the element enter into interiority without being fully ingested or consumed. In a manner resonant with a certain Locke, dwelling thus opens the door for the possibility of possession. Items withdrawn from the *element* but not consumed are held in reserve, forming the *proper* basis of economy itself. Such items, in other words, become one’s own, one’s property; removed from the element and drawn into the expanded interiority of the *oikos*, they constitute the basis of a new form of attachment—of the detachable attachment that *is* possession. Unlike items consumed—given over to the inalienable interiority of enjoyment—possessions reserve the possibility of being withdrawn from interiority, of being handed over. The expanded interiority of the
dwelling thus sets the stage for the possibility of dispossession without which there could be no communication with the Other. Responding to the Other involves a disbursement of the self—a handing over to the Other in terms that necessarily exceed one’s own: in order for something to be given over, it must, of necessity, be detachable from one’s self. While, as we have seen, the affective interiority of enjoyment cannot brook ex-pression (and thereby constitutes the basis of the ineluctable separation of the same), possession provides a perfectly alienable interiority—one which, accordingly, provides the expulsive means for the same to exceed his bounds in responding to the Other.

Indeed, for Levinas, such disbursement lays the foundations for the very formulation of the world—of a world of things, cognizable and thematizable within a horizon of possibility. For Levinas, that is, things are only able to appear as such through their being given over, in response to the questioning regard of the Other.

“In order,” he writes,

that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, refuse both enjoyment and possession, I must know how to give what I possess. Only thus could I situate myself absolutely above my engagement in the non-I. But for this I must encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question.333

By calling me into question, in other words, the Other challenges my natural relationship to that to which I have become attached—namely, my possessions. The interrogative glance of the Other thus carries within it a certain spacing, a certain dis

333 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171.
of distantiation or dispossession, that produces a rupture in the very heart of interiority—inducing a split between myself and my possessions. Through this introjected relay of exteriority—introduced under the gaze of the Other—I am thus enabled to perceive my possessions outside of my direct attachment to them.

Across this gap, I am, in other words, given purchase to perceive my possessions in their independence, as separable, “in themselves”; I am, that is, allowed to perceive them as things that can be separated from my grasp and given over. Indeed, it is precisely in the midst of this giving over—amid the reformulation with regard to exteriority—that objectivity and the possibility of thematization emerge.

In designating a thing I designate it to the Other. The act of designating modifies my relation of enjoyment and possession with things, places the things in the perspective of the Other. Utilizing a sign is therefore not limited to substituting an indirect relation for the direct relation with a thing, but permits me to render the things offerable, detach them from my own usage, alienate them, render them exterior. The word that designates things attests their apportionment between me and the others. The objectivity of the object does not follow from a suspension of usage and enjoyment, in which I possess things without assuming them. Objectivity results from language, which permits the putting into question of possession. This disengagement has a positive meaning: the entry of the thing into the sphere of the other. The thing becomes a theme. To thematize is to offer the world to the Other in speech. "Distance" with regard to the object thus exceeds its spatial signification.334

For Levinas, then, the giving out of dispossession forms the very basis for the possibility of thematization—a possibility which, for him, is coextensive with the horizon of possibility that constitutes the very substance of phenomenology.

334 Levinas, _Totality and Infinity_, 209.
Phenomenology and its illuminated horizon, he contends, can only appear through the refractory lens of the Other—through unilluminable impossibility that establishes the distance and, indeed, the *Desire* necessary for one to reflect back on one’s self and one’s ownmost possibilities. Along these asymptotic lines, Levinas famously argues for ethics as first philosophy—335—in particular, as preceding and laying the groundwork for the possibilities of fundamental ontology and phenomenology *writ large*; rooted in the foundation of the dwelling, however, such groundwork comes near to upending itself.

As we noted above, the dwelling entails a dilation in time. According to Levinas, this dilation is not an effect of the world itself—a postponement derived from some breakdown in the immediate gratification of enjoyment—336—but rather, emerges through a primary intimacy, through a welcome that draws one out of direct immersion in the *element*. The source of this welcome is what Levinas refers to as the *feminine*. While Levinas does argue against the empirical necessity of a “human being of the ‘feminine sex,’”337 the constitution of the dwelling does nevertheless rely upon a *type* of alterity bearing what Levinas conceives as predicates of femininity. Unlike the *properly*, radical Other, the feminine Other does

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335 See “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in Seán Hand’s *The Levinas Reader*, in addition to the section entitled “Metaphysics Precedes Ontology” in *Totality and Infinity*.  
336 In contrast to Heidegger’s conception of the objectifying, theoretical detachment afforded by the failure of a piece of equipment (of a tool ready-to-hand, *Zuhandenheit*) yielding to its becoming present-to-hand (*Vorhandenheit*), as suggested by the phrase “a suspension of usage and enjoyment” in the citation just above.  
337 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 158.
not challenge the same, drawing him into question; on the contrary, hers is a mode of discretion, of gentle withdrawal: the wordless welcome of “a language without teaching, a silent language, an understanding without words, an expression in secret.”

While Levinas’s deeply fraught essentialism has been roundly critiqued and even productively transformed into the very archetype of ethical subjectivity, in this context, as the pivot point between interiority and radical exteriority, it would appear that even the mere introduction of type into alterity is in itself problematic. As we have remarked, in order for alterity to be what it is, it must be withdrawn from all predication that would allow one to get a handle on it. In order to be unmarked, then, feminine alterity would have to encompass the entirety of alterity—suggesting an intimacy of welcome that would clearly subvert the challenge to the self that is the very charge of ethical alterity; otherwise, feminine alterity would have to be distinguished from its radical compeer, resulting in a situation in which both forms would, of necessity, be reciprocally reduced. Divided from feminine alterity, in other words, radical alterity would be diminished of its

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339 For critiques, see Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). Transformations of a Levinasian conception of the feminine tend to take up from this point and include later references to maternity as well. For an excellent reworking of Levinas’s notions of femininity, see Lisa Guenther’s *Gift of the Mother*, where the welcome suggested here is extended via the vision of maternity into a giving that is the very archetype of the ethical—the giving over to the Other before one’s self as a productive alternative to the heroics of the individual. With respect to the formulation here, the conception of the feminine as mother is particularly interesting with respect to the silence, absence of speech or in fans nature here. This will become more relevant in our discussion of Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being* below.
infinite disparity along lines similar to the Hegelian critique of Kantian infinity that we noted above: just as infinity would find itself bounded by a finitude from which it was wholly divorced, so too would radical alterity find itself limited by an alternate alterity of which it could have no part. Moreover, in order for the ethical encounter to even emerge, radical alterity would need to be discernible from its alterior Other. Presuming that the intimate Other (the feminine) in one dwelling is not ontically the same as the intimate Other of another, then the perception of intimate alterity would ultimately rest upon one’s relationship to one’s own, *proper*, intimate Other. Accordingly, intimate alterity and its radical Other would fall to the eye of the beholder. Alterythn then, in both of its forms and, indeed, in order to distinguish them, could only ever emerge as a consequence of the phenomenological possibilities of its perceiver. Consistent with Derrida’s phenomenologically inspired critique, then, the unimpeachable exteriority of radical alterity would ultimately resolve to a category of interiority—to a function of the space prepared by one alterity literally making way for another. Indeed, the very preparation of such outer, inner space—of the exteriorization of interiority in the dwelling—is suggestive of the other phenomenologically fraught dimension opened up by the dwelling, temporality.

As we have remarked, the dwelling emerges through a dilation of time—through a recollection that pulls one back from the edge of immediacy. This distance in time, as we have just noted, is effected through the experience of a welcome that
is not part of the *element* but that interrupts it—hollowing out a space of intimacy through the discretion of its own withdrawal. Through the production of this space, one is thus given distance from the immediacy of immersion in the *element*—one is given time, the time to prepare for future enjoyments and to stave off the menace of any interruption or scarcity in the flow of that *from* which one *lives*. While for Levinas, perhaps, the principle insight here is that distance with respect to the binding interiority of immediacy requires the experience of alterity (albeit in its reduced, intimate form), the result of this temporal dilation slides perilously close to the temporality from which he most aims to distinguish it. While, that is, Levinas takes pains to suggest that the time of the dwelling is no more than an extension of interiority, of enjoyment, it is difficult not to read the dynamics of projection into the very logic of possession—of a taking hold that amounts to a holding in reserve. Projection, in this context, as a form of anticipatory *forehaving*, would entail the entire apparatus of phenomenological temporality—of a horizon extending from the past and informing the present with the projective foresight of possibilities to come. Sensitive to this point, Levinas endeavors to underscore the *blind* and *groping* nature of the hand that grapples with the *element*. “The hand,” he writes, “is the organ of grasping and taking, the first and blind grasping in the teeming mass. . . .” The hand accomplishes its proper function prior to every execution of a plan, every projection of a project, every finality that would lead out of being at home with
oneself.” 340 Far from the instrument of an illuminated horizon—of a
phenomenological temporality that casts the light of a modified present on all that it
presents—the hand that takes possession gropes about in the dark. “[T]he hand that
gropes traverses a void at random”; 341 it does not, ostensibly, know its object
aforehand, but learns it en route, through its blind palpations. Still, if a hand did not,
in some way, know its end, how would it know when it reached it? How would it
know to pull back, to take possession and withdraw its purchase from the element?
If it merely grabbed everything it laid hold of, would it not simply eradicate the
distance of the dwelling, bringing the outside in without discrimination and thereby
obviating the breathing room of a wall? The stakes here are significant: If possession
does require some form of apprehension, then so too would it appear to require the
sort of phenomenological horizon that Levinas wants to hold in abeyance until after
the ethical encounter proper. If, however, possession (and the dispossesion it
affords) is a prerequisite for the ethical encounter, then clearly predicking the
illumination of phenomenological horizontality on the ethical would appear
problematic.

As a staging ground for the ethical encounter, then, the dwelling is vexed
both for its typification of alterity as well as for its dependence on forward-looking
possession. As an intermediary between radical interiority and exteriority, it would

340 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 159.
341 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 170.
appear to *invite* precisely the sort of phenomenological critique that Derrida mounts. Indeed, the very preparation of interiority for the *experience* of radical exteriority lays the foundations for its fundamental diremption. Ultimately, the extent to which the same must have a proper space, set apart, is the extent to which he must *welcome* the Other, take him in; the extent, that is, to which the ethical encounter rests upon the preparation of the same—upon the readiness and capacity of his interiority—is the extent to which it rests upon the very *powers* of his receptivity. In order for the same to *receive* the Other, he must be pre-pared. The *experience* of radical exteriority, then, is a function of interiority, of reception itself. Even if such reception is overwhelmed by that which it lets in, the very power involved in the opening of the door, brings freedom to bear, even in the midst of its laying itself bare, of its exposing itself. Granted the freedom of opening the door may come in response to an unforeseen knock—even an unforeseeable one—still the very framing of the door insures that one is met on one’s own proper terms—summoned from without through a gateway that one has made ready. A knock, after all, even one that comes as a shock, dampens the greater shock of an unannounced barging in; one may be caught entirely unawares, but before opening the door—indeed, in the very process of working it—one has a moment to recollect oneself, *un recueillement*, that comes before whatever comes next. In crossing the tympanum of the door, in other words, the knock that comes to one arrives in a muted, already domesticated form—reduced of its immediacy by the very same
Spacing that pulls one back from immersion in the element. The dwelling gives one time to respond. And though one cannot not respond (leaving the door closed against a knock differs from a door that is simply not open), one is still within the bounds of one’s interiority until one takes it upon oneself to let the Other in. Even in its undoing, then, the power that stands behind a welcome must operate on itself; the hinge around which such reflexivity turns may come from without—from the surprise of an unexpected knock—but in order for the hinge to turn, the cleft that it articulates must have already been effected through the letting in of the welcome—through the dis of a dispossession that has already given itself over in giving way to an outside that it allows to come between it and itself. For the door to be thrown open then the knock must have already been taken in, allowing for the reflex of a reflexivity that pushes against itself in opening itself up and giving itself over. Insofar as the dwelling is a precondition for ethical encounter, then, the experience of alterity is preceded by a certain domestication: it is only, as we have seen, after taking the Other in that one can be taken out—drawn out beyond the bounds of one’s own capacity.

To be clear, Levinas’s grounds for the foundation of the dwelling can be traced to a certain desire for the aneconomic. In articulating the dimensions of the dwelling, of economy, Levinas makes a broad distinction between need and Desire. For Levinas, need is the exclusive preserve of the same—indeed the very means through which the same preserves himself via the gratification of his bodily
requirements. Beyond mere biological necessity, however, Levinas argues that need gives shape to the very distinction that is embodied in the dwelling.

But need is also the time of labor: a relation with an other yielding its alterity. To be cold, hungry, thirsty, naked, to seek shelter—all these dependencies with regard to the world, having become needs, save the instinctive being from anonymous menaces and constitute a being independent of the world, a veritable subject capable of ensuring the satisfaction of its needs, which are recognized as material, that is, as admitting of satisfaction. Needs are in my power; they constitute me as the same and not as dependent on the other. My body is not only a way for the subject to be reduced to slavery, to depend on what is not itself, but is also a way of possessing and of working, of having time, of overcoming the very alterity of what I have to live from. The body is the very self-possession by which the I, liberated from the world by need, succeeds in overcoming the very destitution of this liberation.  

Needs, in other words, by becoming my needs, serve to separate me from the world from which I live. “Needs are in my power” and, as such, give structure to my dominion—to the matters that I can take into my own two hands and satisfy for myself (likewise, they again point toward the horizon of possibilities that constitute my ownmost (jemeinlich) potentiality). Transformed into my dependencies, needs thus cast a light on my independence—on the way in which I satisfy myself by transforming the otherness of the world into my very substance. Indeed, it is only after the realization of such independence—of its proper capacity to satisfy its own needs—that the same is enabled to countenance Desire in the face of the Other:

“Having recognized its needs as material needs, as capable of being satisfied, the I

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can henceforth turn to what it does not lack. It distinguishes the material from the spiritual, opens to Desire.”

For Levinas, Desire is metaphysical—literally beyond the natural, beyond *physis* or the material. In direct contrast to the substance of need, then, the *object* of Desire can never be subsumed or transformed into the same; its *essence*, on the contrary, is infinite withdrawal. Desire, in other words, is another way of expressing the relationship with the Other. “The infinite in the finite,” he writes,

the more in the less, which is accomplished by the idea of Infinity, is produced as Desire—not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies. A Desire perfectly disinterested—goodness. But Desire and goodness concretely presuppose a relationship in which the Desirable arrests the “negativity” of the I that holds sway in the Same—puts an end to power and emprise. This is positively produced as the possession of a world I can bestow as a gift on the Other.

Desire is of an entirely different order than need. Rather than the taking in of satiation—the avid infilling of a lack—Desire draws one out beyond one’s self and one’s self-centered concerns. Indeed, the further one is drawn along—drawn out beyond the restricted orbit of one’s private concerns—the more one is opened up, sensitized to that which exceeds oneself. Desire, in this way, feeds upon its own incapacity—increasing its immeasure in the measure that it is taken up. Through

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343 Ibid., 117.
344 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.
345 A paraphrase of Levinas’s lyrical, paradoxical reflections on “an unmeasured responsibility, because it increases in the measure—or in the immeasurableness—that a response is made, increasing gloriously”—a paradox which he shortly thereafter shores up by saying that there is an “increase of distance proportionate to the approach.” Emmanuel
the inexorable pull of its infinite withdrawal, Desire thus pulls one out beyond the
level of material necessity. Here there is only dis-inter-estedness: this is not a matter
between (inter) beings (esse) operating within the plane of a horizon that could
provide the common ground for an interested exchange.\textsuperscript{346} The same could not
approach the Other with a certain object in mind—in pursuit of a need requiring
fulfillment. Such an approach could never \textit{perceive} the Other, just an instrument, a
means, within its own thematic stage play. It is for this reason that Levinas stipulates
the need for need to have already been sated (in the happy self-possession of the
dwelling) prior to the advent of the ethical encounter. He writes:

In separation—which is produced in the psychism of enjoyment, in egoism, in
happiness, where the I identifies itself—the I is ignorant of the Other. But the
Desire for the other, above happiness, requires this happiness, this
autonomy of the sensible in the world, even though this separation is
deducible neither analytically nor dialectically from the other. The I endowed
with personal life, the atheist I whose atheism is without wants and is
integrated in no destiny, surpasses itself in the Desire that comes to it from
the presence of the other. This Desire is a desire in a being already happy.\textsuperscript{347}

And a bit further on:

Here the relation connects not terms that complete one another and
consequently are reciprocally lacking to one another, but terms that suffice

\footnotesize{Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in \textit{Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings}, eds.
Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, 129-148 (Bloomington, IN:
Indiana University Press, 1996), 144. A similar point is also made in \textit{Totality and Infinity},
where Levinas writes: “The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a
responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed. . .” Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity},
244, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{346} The “goodness” noted above is likewise a reference to a situation beyond beings—here
gesturing toward a common reference of Levinas’s (and later Derrida’s) to the \textit{epekeina tes
ousias}, the “Good” beyond being that Plato describes in \textit{The Republic}.
\textsuperscript{347} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 62.}
to themselves. This relation is Desire, the life of beings that have arrived at self-possession.\textsuperscript{348}

Consonant then with Arendt’s classical rereading of the political, here, the ethical—the departure from the self-centeredness of the separated I—requires the satiation of the ego that separation in the dwelling precisely affords. It is, in other words, only after need has been satisfied in a durable way—after having been freed from its binding constraints\textsuperscript{349}—that the same can move beyond need, toward that which wholly exceeds it, namely, Desire. Levinas’s motivation in framing the dwelling thus follows precisely from his interest in a certain disinterestedness. His construction the \textit{oikos}, of economy, proceeds solely in the name of the aneconomy \textit{to come}. As we have seen, however, even the simple grounding of the \textit{oikos} goes some way toward domesticating alterity and, in so doing, risks the \textit{return} of the economic beneath the

\textsuperscript{348} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{349} With respect to the logic of \textit{freedom} from need, it is worth noting yet another related passage: “But the order of Desire, the relationship between strangers who are not wanting to one another—desire in its positivity—is affirmed across the idea of creation \textit{ex nihilo}. Then the plane of the needy being, avid for its complements, vanishes, and the possibility of a sabbatical existence, where existence suspends the necessities of existence, is inaugurated. For an existent is an existent only in the measure that it is free, that is, outside of any system, which implies dependence. Every restriction put on freedom is a restriction put on being.” Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 104. The conception of creation \textit{ex nihilo} here is complex but relates both to the notion of atheism referenced in the passage above as well as to the concept of freedom. To put a fine point on it, creation \textit{ex nihilo} involves the separation of the creature from its creator such that the creature is not merely an effect of the creator bound by the determining energies that set it in motion. Only a creature so separated could entirely forget its creator in the atheist enjoyment of solipsism. Moreover, and more importantly in the current context, only a creature that \textit{enjoys} separation could be \textit{capable} of meta-physics. Were it bound and determined by the systematicity extending from its cause, a creature would not be free to experience the disruption of system (\textit{meta-}) that exceeds its prescriptive laws (\textit{physis}). Indeed, absent the breach between creator and creature, both the same and the Other would be bound to the self-same systematicity that led to their coming into being.
very feet of the Other whom it welcomes. In order to avoid the slippery matting of economic welcome, then, it will be necessary to take leave of the dwelling, as Levinas effectively does in his second major work, *Otherwise than Being*.

*Otherwise than...*

In *Otherwise than Being*, the dwelling is markedly absent. Within the hollow of its absence a whole series of pivots take place: from freedom to passivity, from receptivity to susceptibility, from a pre-possessed self to one derived entirely from dispossession. Indeed, in a certain regard, *Otherwise than Being* can be seen to circulate precisely around the absence of shelter. Departing somewhat from the primacy of the Other in *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being* focuses foremost on the formation of the self, on the subjectivity of the same. This does not, however, mean that in *Otherwise than Being* the Other does not come first; on the contrary, the an-archic priority of the Other is precisely the basis for the formation of the subject and the means through which passivity and susceptibility form the first principles of its prehistory. First and foremost the subject is subjection, “in its skin,” to the “wounds” and “outrage” of an accusation that it could never have brought upon itself—to an accusation that precedes any possibility of its possibility; to an accusation that precedes its very capacity for free commission. The subject, in other words, is the subject of a persecution.
Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self.\textsuperscript{350}

Given over beyond and before itself, “its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility . . . is the subjectivity of the subject.”\textsuperscript{351}

Denuded beyond any possibility of being covered over, here it is the skin, the flesh, that gives birth to the soul—to the psyche, to the self that is the beating heart of consciousness, albeit in the unheard moments between its pulse.\textsuperscript{352} Here, however, we are perhaps getting ahead of ourselves, exploring a shadow that would best be viewed beneath the light that succeeds and occludes it.

According to Levinas, and very much in line with our earlier reflections on Husserl, that which emerges within the light of consciousness—which appears as such—does so through the recollections and collections of retention and protention.

“Being’s essence,” he writes, “is the temporalization of time, the diastasis of the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{351} Ibid., 14. The sentence structure has been moderately altered here, the original, in part, reads: “This breakup of identity . . . is the subject’s subjectivity, or its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility.”  
\footnote{352} As an upsurge of the passivity on the hither side of the temporality of presence, Levinas argues that the self belongs to the time between time that he refers to as diachrony. Speaking of this time with respect to the skin of the same, he fashions language which we have previously seen Derrida take up in his own later writing about the passive decision: “The expression ‘in one’s skin’, Levinas writes, ‘is not a metaphor for the in-itself; it refers to a recurrence in the dead time or the \textit{meanwhile} which separates inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating dully against the walls of one’s skin.’” Ibid., 109. We will see more of this time shortly below.}

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identical and its recapture or reminiscence, the unity of apperception.” In other words, the identity of the identical—of that which can be identified as such—emerges as a consequence of the “modification’ without alteration or transition” that is temporality—the “modification by which the same comes unstuck or parts with itself, undoes itself into this and that.” It is, Levinas argues, only through this “divergence of the identical from itself” that the same is enabled to be compared with itself—to be equated with itself across the flux of time and thereby constituted as an identity in the first place. The identity of the identical, then, rests not upon the substance of any empirical given, but rather upon the temporalizing operation of consciousness itself. Citing Husserl, he remarks:

"The consciousness of time is the originary locus of the constitution of the unity of identity in general," Husserl writes. The "identical unities" are not given or thematized first, and then receive a meaning; they are given through this meaning. The "this as that" is not lived; it is said.... Identification is kerygmatical. The said is not simply a sign or an expression of a meaning; it proclaims and establishes this as that. Identity, in other words, is not an effect of the world but rather emerges through the constitutive proclamation of this as that. It is, moreover, only through the retentional and protentional structures of internal time consciousness that that is enabled to be retained, and thereby, held forth in anticipatory projection toward the

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353 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 29.
354 Ibid., 30.
355 Ibid.
356 Ibid., 35.
357 “Language is thus not reducible to a system of signs doubling up beings and relations.” Ibid. It does not simply “double up” entities that already exist; on the contrary, it constitutes them as such through the kerygmatic operation of naming them.
sensory data that is structured into the *this* of current, or present, apperception. The identification of the identical thus relies upon a *thickening of the present* that precisely papers over the very gaps that enable its operation: the holding out of *that* toward *this* smoothes over the grounding disjunction of their separation in the *name* of an assertion of sameness that is its very charge. Put otherwise, the miasmatic merging of *this and that* effectively sutures the moments that comprise it into the seamless substance of what Levinas refers to as the *synchronic*. Levinas describes the synchronic as the field in which disparate elements can be held together or assembled, side by side, under the light of presence; it is, in other words, the horizon of phenomenal possibility. What falls out of this horizon is that which cannot be perceived or made presentable—here, for instance, the time between time which Levinas designates as *diachrony*. In the kerygmatic nomination of entities, the synchronous horizon within which they emerge thus remains blinded to the very *light* that brings forth their appearance.\(^{358}\) As we have seen, it is only *disjunction* that provides for the *conjunction* of identity; the nominal forms *named* by identity, however, precisely elide disjunction—putting forth perdurable entities that utterly

\(^{358}\) For his part, and with reference to Plato, Levinas gestures toward a non-thematic, invisible light through which the illuminated appears. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 30. Though perhaps seemingly *resonant*, for Levinas such light is in no way the self-concealing Lichtung of *aletheia*—the illuminating presencing of Being—but precisely the unhinging of Being by the temporal dephasing that puts Being out of joint with itself. Beyond the pulling back of a putting forth, here the withdrawal aims to ab-solve itself entirely of the *game* played in Being; here, in other words, the aim is *wholly otherwise*. For more on this atemporal unhinging, see *Otherwise Than Being*, 28-29, where Levinas describes the dependence of that which appears in Being on the temporal dehiscence that necessarily exceeds it.
occlude the duration upon which they rest. It is, according to Levinas, in this way that the ontic structure of nouns, of beings, covers over the “verbalness of a verb”—the vibratory dephasing of time—that is the very essence of essence.

Apart from its constitutive parting in the meanwhile between moments of presence, the irrecuperable time of diachrony has for Levinas an even deeper history still. In order for identities to be assembled, across their temporal dispersion, there needs to be a subtending identity tying their moments together. “Essence,” Levinas writes,

is drawn out like a colorless thread woven from the distaff of the Parcae. For there to be a return, must not the knot of ipseity be tied at some point? Were this not so, essence would continually elude itself, stretching out like a destiny. How can a jolt, an expulsion outside of the Same, an awakening and tracking down of the Same, the very play of consciousness, occur in the stretching out of essence? How can this distance with regard to the self and nostalgia of the self or retention of the self, according to which every present is a re-presentation, be produced?

As we have seen, the breach of diachrony is essential to the identification of entities and hence to the illumination of essence itself. Absent any unifying anchorage and amid the diremption of diachrony, though, the disparate moments of time would simply fall apart. Separation without the elastic pull of cohesion would yield nothing. In order then for identity to be established, for this to be kerygmatically identified as that, there needs to be a unified substrate, remaining self-same across time and

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359 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 34.
thereby providing the unmoving grounds for diastatic comparison—for this to be held up against that. That this substrate, hypokeimenon or subjectum, could not have emerged through its own kerygmatic identification gestures toward the regression of a subject that, in order to have assembled itself, would have had to precede its self. Along these lines, and carrying forward the thread of the earlier draft of “Substitution” cited above, Levinas writes:

> in order that there be produced in the drawing out of essence, coming out like a colorless thread from the distaff of the Parques, a break in the same, the nostalgia for return, the hunt for the same and the recoveries, and the clarity in which consciousness plays, in order that this divergency from self and this recapture be produced, the retention and protention by which every present is a re-presentation—behind all the articulations of these movements there must be the recurrence of the oneself. The disclosure of being to itself lurks there. Otherwise essence, exonerated by itself, constituted in immanent time, will posit only indiscernible points, which would, to be sure, be together, but which would neither block nor fulfill any fate. Nothing would make itself. The breakup of "eternal rest" by time, in which being becomes consciousness and self-consciousness by equalling itself after the breakup, presuppose the oneself. To present the knot of ipseity in the straight thread of essence according to the model of the intentionality of the for-itself, or as the openness of reflection upon oneself, is to posit a new ipseity behind the ipseity one would like to reduce.\(^{361}\)

In order for the esse of essence to “make itself”—in order for anything to appear as such, woven within the comforting returns of identity—there needs to be a self. Absent such a binding knot, moments would pass, but they would never add up. Tracing the diffuse dimensions of such a scattered horizon, one can imagine a sort of

\(^{361}\) Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 105.
primary narcissism. Here there would be sensibility, but without a sense of the self, of a unifying identity, the sensed would lack all sense, all coherence. At bottom, in order for this to be compared with that, there needs to be a point of parallax—a unifying point holding the two moments together; otherwise, there would simply be this and that or, more precisely, this and this and this . . . stretching out in the “eternal rest” of ever presence. To give moment to time, then, there needs to be a self. Such a self, however, could never simply emerge from the moments of time—from the reflexive returns of a for-itself given over to its own reflection. As suggested above, in order to be there for itself, such a self would have had to have already been there, before itself. “To present the knot of ipseity . . . according to the model . . . of the for-itself . . . is [thus indeed] to posit a new ipseity behind the ipseity one would like to reduce.”

In order then for time to begin—in order for the marked returns of history to be remarked, to be re-inscribed beneath the kerygmatic light of identity—there must first be a subject bearing its inscriptions. Such a subject must thus in some way

\[362\] While Levinas clearly registers his resistance to his conception of psychoanalysis (e.g., in the text of “Substitution,” 83; or marginally, in the footnotes of Otherwise than Being, 194), commentators such as Simon Critchley and Judith Butler have both noted his resonance with psychoanalytic concepts (see for instance, “The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis” in Critchley’s Ethics–Politics–Subjectivity, or Butler’s writings on Levinas in Giving an Account of Oneself). Indeed, in the case of the latter, Butler draws parallels between Levinas’s conception of “primary impingement” by the Other and Jean Laplanche’s notion of primary seduction through the “enigmatic signifier,” which would have some resonance here—though, the differences between Levinas and Laplanche, even as articulated by Butler, make comparing their positions more useful in bringing out each other’s nuances.

\[363\] Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 105.
precede time—precede its own proper history. It is here, then, that we turn to the prehistoric dimension of diachrony. More than the simple in between of the time that it passes through, diachrony, for Levinas, represents untimeliness itself—the time without time that can never be recuperated or assembled beneath the synchronic light of presence. As we noted above, even in the midst of its own time, the same can receive the trace of a time that exceeds any past or future that could ever be assimilated or made at home within its own temporal horizon.

Trace as trace does not only lead into the past. It is the passage itself toward a past which is farther removed than any past and from any future, a passage which is still taking place in my time.364 Pursuing this trace lead us back to a before that could not be brought forward—to a time irretrievably beyond the dimensions of the time of the same; in a word, to the time of the Other. As we likewise noted, a movement beginning within the archic wellspring of the Other necessarily exceeds any possibility of anticipation or protention. What appears or emerges out of such a beginning is always already an after effect—the après coup of an origin irrevocably beyond the bounds of apprehension. The time of the Other is thus a privileged site of diachrony and, indeed, its first site in the initiation of the subject or the self.

364 Levinas, Time and the Other, 46. Referring to this conception of trace in Otherwise than Being, Levinas writes: “Incommensurable with the present, unassemblable in it, it is always ‘already in the past’ behind which the present delays, over and beyond the ‘now’ which this exteriority disturbs or obsesses. This way of passing, disturbing the present without allowing itself to be invested by the ἀρχή of consciousness, striating with its furrows the clarity of the ostensible, is what we have called a trace.” Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 100.
Before being for-itself—that is, before itself as a self—Levinas argues that the same is always already given over to the Other—in its skin, in a nudity that it could never cover over. Exposed in an embodiment that it has yet to grasp, the same is thus given over to a movement that precedes it, to the impossible sur-prise of a being grasped.

At the height of its gnoseological adventure everything in sensibility means intuition, theoretical receptivity from a distance (which is that of the look). But as soon as it falls back into contact, it reverts from grasping to being grasped, like in the ambiguity of a kiss. It reverts from the activity of being a hunter of images to the passivity of being prey, from being aim to being wound, from being an intellectual act of apprehension to apprehension as an obsession by another who does not manifest himself. On the hither side of the zero point which marks the absence of protection and cover, sensibility is being affected by a non-phenomenon, a being put in question by the alterity of the other, before the intervention of a cause, before the appearing of the other. It is a pre-original not resting on oneself, the restlessness of someone persecuted—Where to be? How to be? 365

In “the absence of protection and cover,” in its skin, the same is thus given over to a movement that precedes any possibility for self-coincidence. Beginning with the Other, that is, the touch that grasps the same extends from an origin that could never coincide with the proper, autochthonous dimensions of auto-affection—with any affect or sense that it would be capable of giving to itself. Preceding any beginning to which the same could give rise, the touch that takes hold of it then is indeed “pre-original”—prior to the arche of the same; in a word, an-archic.

In the form of an ego, anachronously delayed behind its present moment, and unable to recuperate this delay—that is, in the form of an ego unable to

365 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 75.
conceive what is "touching" it, the ascendancy of the other is exercised upon the same to the point of interrupting it, leaving it speechless. Anarchy is persecution. . . . [The] inversion of consciousness [resulting from such persecution] . . . cannot be defined in terms of intentionality, where undergoing is always also an assuming, that is, an experience always anticipated and consented to, already an origin and ἀρχή. 366

Given over in its skin, the same is thus exposed to a movement to which it could never catch up and which it could never assume. Here, then, in “the absence of protection and cover,” there can be no question of reception or welcome; here, there is no time for that.

To take hold of oneself for a present of welcome is already to take one's distance, and miss the neighbor [the Other as arrayed in proximity]. In a consciousness that an object affects, the affection reverts into an assumption. Here the blow of the affection makes an impact, traumatically, in a past more profound than all that I can reassemble by memory, by historiography, all that I can dominate by the a priori—in a time before the beginning. 367

Reaching out diachronically from “a time before the beginning,” here there is no phenomenology, only the “non-phenomenon” of the trace, of a past “incommensurable with the present.” Given over in its skin, the same is thus given over to a movement that precedes any initiative that it could have set in motion. Here there is no shelter, no oikos, no framing of a door, only the radical passivity of an unimpeachable exposure. Indeed, more passive still, there is, in the first instance, no one at home, no one to answer for the skin given over.

366 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 101.
367 Ibid., 88.
In fleshing out the depths of anarchic passivity, Levinas underscores its prehistoric dimensions by exploring what he refers to as the “thought that names creation”—a thought to which he explicitly juxtaposes that of ontology.

“[O]ntological thought,” he writes,

[is] where the eternal presence to oneself subtends even its absences in the form of a quest, where eternal being, whose possibles are also powers, always takes up what it undergoes, and whatever be its submission, always arises anew as the principle of what happens to it[.] It is perhaps here, in this reference to a depth of anarchical passivity, that the thought that names creation differs from ontological thought. . . . [I]n creation, what is called to being answers to a call that could not have reached it since, brought out of nothingness, it obeyed before hearing the order. Thus in the concept of creation ex nihilo, if it is not a pure nonsense, there is the concept of a passivity that does not revert into an assumption. The self as a creature is conceived in a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter, that is, prior to the virtual coinciding of a term with itself.  

In ontological thought, being always assumes or takes on whatever comes to pass in its midst. In whatever appears as such, it finds itself as the principle—as the means through which such appearance arises in the first place. Even in the lapses of temporal diastasis, it finds itself in the anticipation of projection—in the anticipation rooted within the field of its ownmost possibilities. Ontological thought thus turns a blind eye to that which cannot be unfolded within or through the unfolding of its own, proper horizon. The thought of creation, on the other hand, begins with a view to a past that precedes all possibility. Called into being, the creature necessarily

368 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 113-14.
369 Here, “finds itself” resonates fully with the reflexive itinerary of Befindlichkeit—the situatedness within and through which one finds oneself (se trouver) through the turns and returns of ecstatic temporality.
succeeds a movement in which it could have had no part. Qua creature, it could never have been present for its own creation; otherwise, it would have had to precede its very self. The creature, then, cannot assume its first principle; it comes after, always irretrievably after—anarchically.

For Levinas, then, the “self as a creature” could not have preceded “the noninstant of creation”—the diachronic instant outside of time, before time, in which it was “called to being.” Prior to being able to find itself for-itself—in the reflexive returns of the economy of being, of ontology—the self is found; over taken (sur-pris) in being taken up by the pre-original contact of the Other. What the Other finds through this discovery, then, is not the self as it is for-itself, but rather as it is in-itself, despite itself, in its skin. What, in other words, is uncovered in the fullness of its nudity, is not the self as it would appear to itself, but rather, the self as taken from without—from the vantage of an exteriority to which it is ineluctably exposed. “In its skin it is stuck in its skin, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability.” Given over to the Other, before and beyond itself, the subject that emerges from the subjectivation of the self is thus the subject as subjected—as the object of an alterior subjectivity. Prior to its having been taken up—to the moment of its creation—the self would have lacked the distance necessary to perceive itself as such. It would, in other words, have lacked the lapsus necessary for kergymatic

370 “[T]he noninstant of creation” is remarked in the original essay “Substitution,” 89. “[C]alled to being” refers back to the citation noted above, Otherwise than Being, 113-114. 371 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 51.
identification. In the an-archic infinity of its withdrawal, the touch of the Other introduces a vacuum or gap into the suffusion of eternal rest—inaugurating the rhythm, the “diastole and systole” of temporality itself. Reaching out diachronically, transversally across time, the touch of the Other sets the oscillations of temporality in motion. The gap thus provides for the welcomed return—for the constitution of the familiar and for its recuperative embrace. As we suggested above, however, the gap cannot account for subjectivity itself, at least, that is, not in its traversal.

Earlier, indeed prior to and presaging the foray into the prehistory of the subject, we noted that in order for kerygmatic identification to take place, it requires a place in which to proceed—it requires, in other words, a substrate to preserve its inscriptions across the diastasis of time. As the basis for kerygmatic identification, then, the subject or hypokeimenon cannot itself be based on the kerygmatic. The self, in other words, cannot be as it is for-itself through the reflexivity of return. Just as any welcoming of the Other always already comes too late—entailing a recuperation that consequently misses the very alterity of the Other—so too the reflexivity of the for-itself involves a recuperation that entirely elides the subjection of subjectivity. For Levinas, the self that takes hold of itself in its reflexive returns is not the self, but the Ego. Perceiving itself in its starts and its finishes, the Ego assumes itself as the principle or arche of everything that it undergoes. The Ego, in other words, is the subject of ontological thought—an atheistic subject blind to the creation that preceded and in-spired it. This recuperated self, for Levinas, comes
only after the fact of its creation—indeed in *response* to its creation. Taken up from without, in the very breath of its creation, the subject is for the first time, pre-originally, exposed to its exposure—to its being given over to a world which exceeds it and within which, accordingly, it forms a discrete, located and locatable part. The self, in effect, is carved out in its skin. In the first instance of this *noninstant*, though, there is none of the reflexivity that would allow one to retreat into oneself, only the irrepressible sensibility, the shock of being given over—of finding oneself found out when one was not even aware of one’s having been out there in the first place. The identity of the self, the subjectivity of the subject, then, is in no way a reflection of how it would appear to itself, but rather, an effect of how it appears to the Other, *for* the Other. The subjectivity of the subject, in other words, is the self as it is given over, to the Other, despite itself, in the depths of a passivity that it could never have chosen and which it can do nothing to assume. It is in this way that the self-same gap that provides for the *de-nouement* and retying of the knot of reflexive identity at the same time binds the self to itself, beneath itself. The gap that provides for the kerygmatic identification of the self *cum* Ego, in other words, is precisely the same gap that provides the anchorage, or tethering point, for this retying through the constitution of an unimpeachable identity, imposed on the subject beyond and before its very capacity for the kerygmatic. Prior to and subtending any capacity that the self might have for tying itself together, then, is the utter unraveling of a having-been-taken-up that binds it to itself in the *first* place. ‘Subjectivity in this sense is not
a for-itself but an in-itself”—an in-itself, as we noted above, as it is in its skin; indeed, beneath its skin.  

The materiality of the touch and the substance of the skin goes some way toward obscuring what, for Levinas, constitutes the metaphysics of creation. As we remarked above, “[t]he self as a creature is conceived in a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter.” Following from the classical pattern of prime matter, Levinas insists that matter maintains an “obduracy,” stands up for itself, even under the impress of the form that is imposed upon it. “As a potential being,” he writes, “prime matter remains a power which form takes into account. It is not by chance that Plato speaks of the indestructibility of matter or that Aristotle views matter as a cause.” Matter, in this regard, even amid the passivity of its being informed, holds onto a certain self-coincidence. The subject, on the contrary, is otherwise.

The ego is in itself not like matter is in itself, which, perfectly wedded to its form, is what it is. The ego is in itself like one is in one’s skin, that is to say, cramped, ill at ease in one’s skin, as though the identity of matter weighing on itself concealed a dimension allowing a withdrawal this side of immediate coincidence, as though it concealed a materiality more material than all matter. The ego is an irritability, a susceptibility, or an exposure to wounding and outrage, delineating a passivity more passive still than any passivity relating to an effect.

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373 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 113-114.
375 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 108.
Grasped in the materiality of its skin, the subject is pressed into itself, beneath itself—well beyond the capacity of any material pressure; indeed, more nearly, the opposite. As we noted above, the grasp that reaches out to the subject places the subject in touch with an infinite withdrawal—with the anarchic impossibility of the Other. “It is because in an approach, there is inscribed or written the trace of infinity, the trace of a departure, but trace of what is inordinate, does not enter into the present, and inverts the arche into anarchy, that there is . . . responsibility and a self.” The self, in other words, comes into being under the impress of a vacuum. In effect, amid the obverse mechanics of metaphysics, the extent to which the self feels the gravity of the Other’s withdrawal is the extent to which it feels pulled into itself—constricted, “backed up against itself, . . . or twisted over itself in its skin, too tight in its skin.”

As we saw in our earlier discussion of Totality and Infinity, the self and the Other do not line up along a common border, identified and defined by their mutual delimitation. On the contrary, on either side of their point of contact—of the skin through which they come into touch—the two withdraw infinitely, inexorably beyond the bounds of any possible contiguity. The trace that marks the infinite withdrawal of the Other marks, at the same time (indeed in two times), the converse arc of an introversion—of the compression of the self into itself under

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376 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 117.
377 Ibid., 104.
378 “Neither conjuncture in being, nor reflection of this conjuncture in the unity of transcendental apperception, the proximity of me with the other is in two times, and thus is a transcendence.” Ibid., 85.
the weight of a responsibility that mounts in proportion to this withdrawal: “The more I answer the more I am responsible; the more I approach the neighbor with which I am encharged the further away I am. This debit which increases is infinity as an infinition of the infinite, as glory.” In pressing in upon the skin of the subject, then, the Other does not act upon the subject directly, physically, but rather metaphysically—across the insurmountable gap of transcendence. The Other, that is, does not produce the subject as a cause would produce an effect. Such a production would simply reduce the subject to a determinate effect of the Other—binding the two to a common plane through the causal chain linking them together. On the contrary, and as we have suggested, here there is a peeling away—an infinite withdrawal on either side of the skin. On its outer surface, the skin is given over to the world, despite the self; on its inner edge, it is given over to a sensibility that is the province of the self alone. The skin, then, is like an axis separating two asymptotes: on one end reaching infinitesimally toward one another while, on the other, pulling infinitely apart. Indeed, it is precisely this pulling apart that inaugurates the pulling away of the subject beneath the skin. It is, in other words, precisely in the sensibility of the withdrawal that the self is given over to itself as a self. That it can be approached—touched from a without that it can in no way apprehend—puts it in touch with itself in the very midst of its dispossession. Finding itself outside of itself, the subject is compelled to respond to the situation in which it

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379 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 93.
finds itself found out, apprehended or grasped. The subject, in other words, is compelled to respond to its newly uncovered position, even as the deposition of a dispossession, of a having been placed.\textsuperscript{380} The self that it finds, grasped in its nudity, is not a self that it would have given to itself, but rather, itself as it is for the Other. This is not, as we have seen, an assignation or persecution that the subject could in any way evade, any more than it could separate itself from its own skin. Proceeding an-archically, from the grasp of the Other, here there is no self to cover over or protect itself; here, that is, there is no freedom or agency, only the susceptibility of a passivity that goes infinitely beyond skin deep. It is, however, precisely in the aftermath of this assignation that the subject’s capacity for self-possession emerges.

The self that takes hold of itself, that takes itself into its own, proper possession, grips onto itself as the object of its subjectivity, or for-itself. The object onto which it grasps, however, would not have emerged had it not been for its pre-original seizure by the Other. It is, in other words, only in finding itself given over that the subject comes to collect itself in the first place. Had it not been interrupted in its core, beneath its core, it would never have cored itself out, or denucleated itself; it would not, that is, have found itself pressed into itself to the point of compelling its own self-detachment.

In its own skin. Not at rest under a form, but tight in its skin, encumbered and as it were stuffed with itself, suffocating under itself, insufficiently open,

\textsuperscript{380} “Already the position of the subject is a deposition, not a \textit{conatus essendi}.” Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 127.
forced to detach itself from itself, to breathe more deeply, all the way, forced to dispossess itself to the point of losing itself.\footnote{Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 110.}

Pressed into itself, to the point of suffocation, to the point where it has no room to breathe, much less to back away from itself, the self is compelled to take itself on—to come to terms with and answer for the \textit{place} that it finds itself to be taking.\footnote{“Pascal’s ‘my place in the sun marks the beginning of the image of the usurpation of the whole earth. A fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate, in spite of its conscious and intentional innocence. . . . It is the fear of occupying someone else’s place with the \textit{Da of my Dasein}.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in The Levinas Reader, ed. Seán Hand, 75-87 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 82.} Under the weight of an assignation that it can do nothing to decline, the subject, in other words, finds itself bound to an identity that cannot be shirked and for which, accordingly, it must answer. Under this weight, then, the subject is compelled to gather itself together so as to give itself out, in response. In effect, the pressure from without press the subject into itself to the point of its own expulsion: here there is implosion followed by explosion; a coring out or \textit{fission}.\footnote{As suggested by our reference to “denucléation” above (Otherwise than Being, 64; \textit{Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence}, 105), Levinas makes significant reference to such nuclear imagery, as in the following passage from which the figure of fission shimmers brightly: “being at the question before any interrogation, any problem, without clothing, without a shell to protect oneself, stripped to the core as in an inspiration of air, an absolution to the \textit{one}, the one without a complexion. It is a denuding beyond the skin, to the wounds one dies from, denuding to death, being as a vulnerability. It is a fission of the nucleus opening the bottom of its punctual nuclearity, like to a lung at the core of oneself. The nucleus does not open this depth as long as it remains protected by its solid crust, by a form, not even when it is reduced to its punctuality, for it identifies itself in the temporality of its essence, and thus covers itself over again. The limit-of the stripping bare, in the punctual core, has to continue to be torn from itself. The one assigned has to open to the point of separating itself from its own inwardness, adhering to \textit{esse}; it must be disinterested. This being torn up from oneself in the core of one’s unity, this absolute noncoinciding, this diachrony of the instant, signifies in the form of one-penetrated-by-the-}\footnote{Under the pressure of an...}
irremissible responsibility, then, the subject that collects itself, collects itself precisely with a view toward handing itself over. The self that is taken hold of through this self-collection is thus pre-originally marked—scored on its hither side—by the dispossession that inspires it. As we noted above, in the departure from the dwelling, dispossession is the birth of ob-jectivity. Being structured so as to be given out, that which can be dispossessed possesses of necessity the intrinsic possibility of dis-placement or separability. Indeed, here it is precisely this possibility that grants the subject the spacing required to take itself up. It is only in separating itself from its self—from the self into which it has been irremissibly plunged—that the subject can achieve the breathing room necessary to take up its own archic capacity.

Responsibility is pressed onto the self, despite itself; the taking up of this responsibility, in response, however, already entails the backing up of a movement of the self for itself. It is then precisely in responding, in dispossessing itself of itself, that the subject first takes itself into its own, proper possession. As the object of its subjectivity, the self that it takes hold of, qua ob-ject, is structured to sur-vive the alienating transit of its being given forth, or handed over. Such transit, however, does not end with the subject’s original response to the Other. Amid the intro-verted short-circuit of its for-itself, a similar transit is continually and recurrently

other. The pain, this underside of skin, is a nudity more naked than all destitution.” Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 49.
survived—namely, the transit across the atemporal diastasis of time. The self that the subject gives to itself, *for-itself*—in the repeated instances of its self-presence, or kerygmatic self-identity—is thus the self-same objective self gathered in response to the Other. The self that it is *for-itself*, or Ego, is, in other words, precisely the self that it gives over in response to its having been given over—before itself.

Though in the sutured iterations of its self-presence, the subject may well lose sight of its imperceivable dispossession, such dispossession remains, as we have said, emblazoned on the hither side of its very hold onto itself. Indeed, for Levinas, this dispossession is *present* in every presentation or response that it makes. According to Levinas, any theme or content that can be presented or *said*—that can be assembled within the synchronic horizon of presence or re-presentation—is always of necessity subtended by a *saying* that it invariably covers over or obscures. Inverting our discussion of sincerity in *Totality and Infinity*, this *saying* gestures back toward the fact that no matter the substance of what one says, one can never dissimulate the fact of one’s saying it; no matter, that is, if one’s presentation is made of whole cloth, one can never cover over the nudity of one’s self as the one presenting it. Beneath any presentation, then, the subject remains exposed in the self-same nudity that the reflexivity of its for-itself endeavors to fold over and cover

384 It is worth remarking here Levinas’s notion of recurrence: It a certain sense recurrence can be read as a counterpoint to the economic logic of the Hegelian return. Unlike the return—in which the familiar comes back into its *own*—recurrence marks the very apogee of dispossession, the diachronic instant in which one is pressed into one’s self, despite oneself, from the outside. Though recurrence, then, does indicate a form of repetition, such repetition is entirely on the hither side of the familiar.
up. Whatever self-possession it presents, in presenting itself as it takes itself to be, is, in other words, always already belied by the very presenting itself. Whatever it says, whenever it speaks, the self is thus always intoning, beneath its voice, sotto voce, the here I am of its being the one speaking. Beneath every said, that is, resonates the “here I am” of the responsibility—of the having had to respond—taken up in the very speaking of it. Even in the internal monologue of its own reflexivity, the self that the for-itself gives to itself is, as we have seen, only taken up in response—in its having had to respond to the an-arachic circumstance in which it could have found itself only ever after. The I of “here I am,” then, could never be the “I” of the subject alone, as appears to itself, for-itself. On the contrary, this I is the I of a responsibility that could never have been chosen and that could not be evaded. This I is in no way the individuation of a concept or generalization that could be objectified or taken apart from its subject; on the contrary, it is the I of a singular responsibility for which no one else can answer: an I, which alone, must answer for the space that it takes up.

The subject fleshed out by Levinas is thus indeed a subject of responsibility—a subject belonging to and emerging from a responsibility that precedes its very self.

385 Speaking of the saying, Levinas writes, “It is already a sign made to another, a sign of this giving of signs, that is, of this non-indifference, a sign of this impossibility of slipping away and being replaced, of this identity, this uniqueness: here I am. The identity aroused thus behind identification is an identity by pure election. Election traverses the concept of the ego to summon me as me through the inordinateness of the other. . . . This identity is pre-original, anarchic, older than every beginning.” Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 145. This “here I am” refers back to the bearing witness before God of such biblical figures as Abraham and Moses.
Identified from the outside and given over in a dispossession that forms the basis of its self-possession, such a subject is aneconomic in the extreme. Here, the publicity of exposure precedes any possibility of privacy—of being at home with itself; here, rather than stepping out from the oikos, the step into the oikos can only ever trace a withdrawal—a retreat into a domain framed in dispossession and thus pre-originally and ever after given over to a giving outward. Departing from a subject conceived in rights and self-possession, then, the subject of responsibility opens a door onto what is perhaps an alternate vision of the political—one in which the public precedes the private and in which one takes up one’s position in the face of a responsibility that is greater than one’s self. Here, under the light of the denucleation of the atomic individual, it becomes possible to imagine ever-new forms of the political emerging, an-archically, just beyond the horizon—a beyond into which we will venture a few, tentative steps below.
Epilogue

As we noted in opening, neoliberalism frames its conception of the political around the individual—around the private interests of its subjects. Given over to such interests, the political is given over wholesale to the economic. The political, that is, fails to rise to the level of the political as such—to the level of the public or the shared. Under the self-reproducing logic of the economic, moreover, the very possibility of such public commitment seems gravely in doubt. Given over to a fully constructed “state of nature,” it is quite natural for self-interest to take center stage and for broader interests to recede—particularly as the pressure and boil of constant competition continues to mount. Indeed, in a political domain in which even the idea of public interest is reduced to a “special” or particular interest, the possibility of rising above the private, above the economic, would appear foreclosed.

It is, then, in the hopes of prying open this foreclosure—of re-constituting the space for the political proper—that we have endeavored a few modest steps toward the reconception of the political subject—not as a subject of rights or individual freedom, but as a subject of responsibility. It is, in other words, the hope here that a subject turned outward—given over to its exposure prior to even the capacity to turn back on its self—can form the basis of an alternate politics; can stand, that is, as
a fully political alternative to the bound and contorted timber that is the product and spring of economic subjectivity.

As we have described at length, the form of responsibility in question here is the responsibility of being in question itself. Far from the responsibilities of guilt or ownership, this is the responsibility of having to respond, of having to answer for oneself to the Other—to the incomprehensible exteriority that comes before one’s self. Unlike Nietzschean guilt or neoliberal ownership, here responsibility demands that one take leave of one’s self-centering. Here, that is, there is none of the excoriating pain of self-attachment that Nietzsche describes with respect to the neurotic, inward turn of the morally repressed; nor is there the ramped up, hyper-vigilant concern with one’s own—with the minding of one’s own best interests through making the most expeditious use of one’s possessions and resources. Here, responsibility is, of necessity, an extro-version.

The fostering of such an outward turn would suggest to us the need for a certain pedagogical transformation—a transformation along the lines of the Levinasian conception of learning-as-a-being-taught. Such learning would stand antipodally apart from what Paulo Freire has trenchantly described as the “banking model” of education. Here education would not be a matter of acquisition—of filling empty vessels from the stores of accumulated knowledge. Here the investiture

of “symbolic capital,” of certification and qualification, would fall by the wayside.\textsuperscript{388}

Amid the current domination of neoliberalism, it is far from accidental that metrics and quantitative testing are paramount; that the putative capacity of a thinking machine is tested by its proficiency with trivia on a game show.\textsuperscript{389} In the current ethos, it is the ownership of that which one has at his command that is the test of learning \textit{qua} mastery. With learning-as-a-being-taught, it would be \textit{otherwise}. Here the priority would be on the question, not on the answer; on the taking in and the taking on of the having to respond. Responding to a question would not entail simply supplying its answer, but allowing its disruptive force to shake up one’s own self-attachments. Responding to questions would thus always entail an increase in responsibility, in sensitivity to the as yet unthought and unthinkable. Rather than the perpetual increase of one’s stores of knowledge, here there would be a more which is always a less—an increase in openness that is always, at the same time, a decrease in self-possession. Education would thus draw one along to being ever further drawn out. Far from a hardship, then, here exposure would become an enticement. Drawn out beyond one’s self, one would be drawn into the inter-synaptic gap, into the leap between question and answer that is the very domain of

\textsuperscript{388} For the phrasing and elaboration of “symbolic capital,” we will forever be indebted to Bourdieu.

\textsuperscript{389} Though the ostensible object of Watson’s besting of \textit{Jeopardy!’s} best was to prove its facility for responding to natural language conditions, the subtext of measuring intelligence by the capacity for data retention and management cannot be overestimated. The fact that Watson was able to defeat the smartest people in the room—likewise measured by their data for capacity—was the real proof of its burgeoning intelligence.
creativity. Here, as with the passive decision, one would step out into the breach—would cede one’s self-possession and sovereignty—for a return that takes one elsewhere, otherwise. Of course, knowledge could and would need to continue to be imparted: as with the passive decision, one must have as much information as possible to fully grasp the problem that eludes the analytic reflection of the programmatic—that eludes any auto-matic resolution contained within the data themselves. Nevertheless, and again as with the passive decision, such preparatory work would simply stand in the service of what comes next—of ce qui arrive in the contratemporal instant of being out, beyond one’s self. Rather than the securitized and the secure, then, here one would be given over to the uncertain growth demanded by the leap across the im-possible.

In a space given over to such priorities—given over, that is, to being given out—we are struck by the possibility that generosity could flourish. In a domain in which the question has primacy over the answer, the rectitude of being right would

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390 A similar point can perhaps be drawn from Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, in which knowledge of the impossible telos of a work is paramount to the aesthetic operation whereby it pulls one out of one’s self into the gap between what it is and what it is gesturing toward. Indeed, it is precisely the tension of this difference, of this synaptic gap, that engages the very transport (beyond self-possession and the confirmation of one’s own prepossessed worldview) of the aesthetic work.

391 In this register, perhaps a similar, albeit oddly-paired, aesthetic reference could be brought to bear: namely, Heidegger’s writing in “What Are Poets For?” Reflecting upon an unpublished poem by Rilke, Heidegger describes at length the security of “unshieldedness”—the being “without care” (sine cura, as he notes) that can only emerge in the opening to openness (to the Open proper) that entails the release of the objectifying will’s concern with the protection of the unprotected, with the securing of the insecure. Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), 117ff.
no longer be freighted with the weight of self-preservation. In the current conditions of an economy in which competitive advantage requires the mastery of circumstances, it is unsurprising that being right, or at least appearing to be right as much as possible, is amongst the highest priorities. Preserving one’s position within such a field places a premium upon rectitude and upon its doubly negative corollary, the relative rectitude of being *more right than*. Apart from being positively correct, that is, another means of shoring up one’s reserves of symbolic capital entails finding fault in the positions of others; one may not have the answers oneself, but negating the failures of another’s position can, nevertheless, serve to advance one apace, relatively. In such a space—governed, on the one hand, by the demands of rectitude and, on the other, by the threat of critical attack—it would be hardly surprising to find many voices silenced and others bound up by the proleptic necessities of self-defense. Where, however, the exposure of having to respond is privileged over having a response, the capital requirements of engaging in the exchange of ideas would be entirely undone. Here, it would not be being right that would have priority, but rather, in a certain sense, the capacity for being wrong—the capacity, that is, to take on or be sensitized to one’s incapacity, to the limits of one’s own proper perceptions. Here, that is, one would be increasingly drawn to exceed one’s capacity, not by increasing its dimensions, but by increasingly stepping out from beyond its privative bounds. As we have continued to suggest, in such a space, venturing forth from the walls of the *oikos* would not be a threat but a promise (*pro-*)
mettre)—a putting forth toward unforeseeable horizons. In the absence of the economy of threat, then, there would be no need of the security achieved through fostering the insecurity of others. Others, all others, would be sites of possibility—welcomed, without being anticipated, unconditionally. Far from the protective demands of self-possession, here then—where ceding of the right of way would exceed any mere benefit of the doubt—the decoupling chain reaction of generosity could prevail.

Amid such chained unlinking, it becomes possible to imagine a new form of politics taking root. As we noted in opening, here too substance would follow form. Contrary, however, to the “command and control” mechanics of mastery dictated by the domain of competition, here the divesting logics of exposure would place a premium on exposedness, on responsibility itself. Rather, that is, than the assertion of position through the assertion of positions, here political acuity would stand as a measure of sensibility—of the sensitive taking on and taking seriously of that which comes before one. Rather, that is, than the capacity to simply answer, close off or deflect questions, here the priority would fall upon consideration and engagement—upon taking seriously the possibility of possibilities that had not previously occurred to one. Rather than a proving ground for the shields and spears of combative monologues, politics, here then, could become instead a site of dialogue—of genuine discursive engagement. Such engagement would be committed not to closures, fixtures or consensus but to the promulgation of openings, ever
outward. As we remarked with Levinas, responsibility is a form that increases in the measure that it is taken up. Here too, the same impossible calculus would apply. The exposure to question that would constitute the political would bring ever new questions to bear—baring ever new sites of exposure, of sensibility. With each disclosure, the currencies of rectitude and self-attachment would continue to become undone—drawing subjects continually outward from their privative domains into public or political life. Such drawing out, in turn, would continue to increase the draw of the political itself through the multiplication of its unforeseeable sites. Openness, then, would beget openness, following the same intractable lines as the responsibility which subtends it.

Though in the midst of such opening ever outward—and indeed in the very urgency of its diachronic offbeat—decisions would have to be made (to be arrived at), the priority here would remain squarely on the availability of such determinations to question—on their susceptibility, that is, to unforeseen possibilities. It is here, moreover, in the name of forcing the undoing of force, that we arrive at a means of both preserving, but likewise, potentially, of initiating the responsibility of government. Toward articulating the sort of pre-original opening that would disbar the foreclosure of power, a broad-based coalition could put forward the face of the Other by coming together under the infinite demand of

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392 Pointedly, we are not here looking for the antagonistic movement toward rational agreement entailed by discourse ethics.
Justice, as we have seen, is a matter of singularity. Though singularity qua singularity can never be folded into the universal—can never, that is, be reduced into an instance of any genus that would embrace it—it is nevertheless just to say that *tout autre* is indeed *tout autre*; that every singularity is wholly singular or entirely otherwise. Insofar, then, as no singularity can be abstracted from itself, singularity *as such* lays the basis for a common ground that defies any gesture toward the totalization of universality. Where the rubber meets the road of subjectivity, the grounding of this ground is, as we have seen, responsibility: namely, the unique and utterly irrevocable responsibility of *each* subject to answer for him-or herself. Inverted in the name of every Other, however, such responsibility can be politically mobilized as a demand—as the interminable demand of justice for every Other. Standing together, under the shared commitment to the ineradicably uncommon singularity of every Other, a coalition then could, in a sense, affect its own singularity, its own alterity. Though in taking up the responsibility of its demands, it could and indeed should come together around particular instances of injustice, such instances could never serve to define it from one moment to the next. Organized around the infinite demand of justice, its movements could never be foreseen and would, of necessity, proceed without end. Accordingly, its demands

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393 In referring here to “infinite demand,” it would be an oversight not to mention Simon Critchley’s book *Infinitely Demanding*. Though our trajectories significantly part ways—particularly around such notions as anger and antagonism; notions which, for us, would only serve to re-inscribe the sorts of pained self-attachment from which we are trying to depart—our sources and inspirations are very much aligned and we are, in general, deeply sympathetic with the work.
could never be satisfied or met. Absent any identity apart from the absence of identity—of any identifying or generalizable particularity—it could never be divided or hegemonically countered; division by zero, after all, is undefined and leads only ever onward toward infinity. Such a coalition, then, could enact alterity and compel responsibility without ever discharging the infinity of its responsibility or its demands. In its face, then, there could be no question of a justice well done, of a proper balancing of the scales. The demand of justice can never be compensated, for it is precisely the balance of equity, the calculation of fairness, that would dangerously lead one to believe that one could properly account for the Other. The very idea that such accommodation could be possible—that one could rightly treat the Other as an instance of one’s own imaginings—is the archic beginning of violation itself. One can never be alone with one’s self-satisfactions and ever even approach the asymptotic slope of justice. In the name of justice as unfairness, then—as an insufficiency that could never close over its self—the demand for a politics of responsibility could, perhaps, be insured against the threat of its indemnity, against the shored up violation of self-coincidence and right. Perhaps.
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