Liron Karpati
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Faith in the Conflict of Conscience

I argue that Derrida's "Whom To Give To (Knowing not to Know)"[1] reflects a deep epistemic crisis in ethics revealed by the moral horror of collective fanaticism omnipresent in Nazi Germany. First, I will outline the crisis explicitly by borrowing language from Viktor Frankl. Then, I will demonstrate how Derrida's analysis of Kierkegard's analysis of the Binding of Isaac reflects and affirms this crisis. After briefly touching on how Derrida's critique of ethics differs from the critiques of Enlightenment humanism examined in class, I will summarize the meaning of the epistemic crisis in ethics that Derrida deconstructs.

What do we mean by collective fanaticism and what epistemic crisis does it reveal? Following Viktor Frankl we can understand "collective thinking" as man "submerg[ing] himself in the masses" so that he "abandons himself as a free and responsible being."[2] We can understand fanaticism to be "ignor[ing]… the man who thinks differently" because only one's "own opinion is valid."[2] The fanatic "does not really have them [his opinions]; his opinions have him."[2] The collective and the fanatic are in some sense opposed because "while the collectivist ignores his own personality, the fanatic ignores that of the other man."[2] However, they can be combined into *collective fanaticism* because man can heed the call of another and believe it is authentically his calling - fanaticism only requires rejection of the opinions of those who think differently not the rejection of everyone else's opinions.

If we aim to avoid collective fanaticism because of the scars it left on the world in WW2, we could simply reject both collectivism and fanaticism. That is surely the safest bet to avoid the horrors of collective fanaticism. But if we reject collectivism *completely* and we wish man to follow ethical convictions, then man is forced to reject the convictions of others, leaving only his own convictions to ascertain what is ethical. This is fanaticism. On the other hand, if we reject fanaticism *completely* and we wish man to follow ethical convictions, then man should always take up the ethical convictions of his peers, rejecting his own convictions. This is collectivism.

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[1] Derrida, Jacques. "Whom To Give To: Knowing not to Know." *The Gift of Death.* University of Chicago Press, 1996

[2] Frankl, Viktor. *The Doctor and The Soul*. New York, Random House, 1946, pp. xxii-xxiii

The rejection of one (of collectivism or fanaticism) necessitates the acceptance of the other, assuming we wish man to follow some ethical convictions. It follows that we can only completely reject both collectivism and fanaticism if we also reject the wish for man to follow ethical convictions. Given that we wish man to be ethical (to follow some ethical conviction), we are compelled, by force of logic, to accept fanaticism or collectivism (or both). This is the crisis.

Derrida deconstructs the logical binary propping up this crisis in "Whom To Give To" by examining the question 'to whom are we responsible?' or in other words 'whom *to give*[3] to?' to our personal convictions or to the convictions of others? The deconstruction proceeds by considering the role secrecy plays in ethics through the biblical story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, The Binding of Isaac.

Derrida notes that "Abraham doesn't speak of what G-d ordered him alone to do."[4] The question then becomes why? Why does Abraham not inform Sarah of his godly mission or Isaac about the great service he is to perform by the behest of G-d? The reason, says Derrida (following Kierkegard) is that "in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility."[5] To share an authentic mission with another is to open yourself up to the considerations of others (who can impede liberty) and to destroy the uniqueness of the task since now another can share it (the loss of personal responsibility). The secrecy locks personal responsibility within and from that which is without. "Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique"[4] because to speak is to impress yourself upon others and to let others impress themself upon you. Singular personal responsibility (which Derrida calls ultimate or absolute responsibility) is available only to the individual fanatic - to someone like Abraham - and it "implies secrecy."[4]

Yet, "by keeping the secret Abraham betrays ethics."[3] He betrays the very ethics codified in the ten commandments which owe to his legacy. He betrays the public ethical duty which demands "that responsibility is tied to the public and to the nonsecret … the necessity of accounting for

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[3] 'To give' has a double meaning as in 'to give something' (associated with kindness, sharing, and so ethics) or as I am using it here 'to give in.'

[4] Derrida, Jacques. "Whom To Give To: Knowing not to Know." *The Gift of Death.* University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 59

[5] Derrida, Jacques. "Whom To Give To: Knowing not to Know." *The Gift of Death.* University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 60

one's words and actions in front of others."[6] Derrida calls this general responsibility - it is the responsibility which comes from submerging oneself in the crowd and to the rules of the crowd. It is responsibility derived from the collective.

It is this collectivist responsibility that Kierkegard finds so hard yet imperative to escape. Derrida explains that "Kierkegard keeps coming back to this… that he wouldn't be capable of doing what he [Abraham] did."[7] He feels tortured by the "moral temptation which, under a pretext of … responsibility… make[s] him lose his ultimate responsibility."[6] For Kierkegard, individual fanaticism appears the only way to live authentically.

Derrida deconstructs Kierkegard's position on the grounds that in the very aim to be able to be like Abraham, to be able to rid himself of the common repulsion to sacrificing one's own son, Kierkegard misunderstands the essence of the secret Abraham kept. The reason the secret is a symbol of true faith is not its specific content (to sacrifice a son as a declaration of faith to G-d) but that it "*cannot* be transmitted from generation to generation."[7] Kierkegard is not obviously more authentic in copying Abraham's secret than in adhering to the moral order by which he feels tempted - is that temptation not a sign of inner conviction? We realize that we cannot know if our convictions are uniquely ours or borrowed, or per Derrida, "faith can never be … a certainty."[7] Our ignorance means we can not draw a line between our fanaticism and collectivism. The binary is false because this distinction cannot clearly be made and yet it is still there. This is the deconstruction of "ethics as… an *insoluble* and *paradoxical* contradiction between responsibility in general and absolute responsibility."[6]

So what are we to do? Are we forever stuck? Yes. But does that mean there is nothing we can do? No. Derrida goes on: "the contradiction and the paradox must be *endured* in the instant. The two duties must contradict one another, one must subordinate (incorporate, repress) … the other."[8] In more familiar language: one must take recourse to conscience. Man cannot know

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[6] Derrida, Jacques. "Whom To Give To: Knowing not to Know." *The Gift of Death.* University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 59-61
[7] Derrida, Jacques. "Whom To Give To: Knowing not to Know." *The Gift of Death.* University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 79-80
[8] Derrida, Jacques. "Whom To Give To: Knowing not to Know." *The Gift of Death.* University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 66

whom to give to, to whose convictions he is responsible, but man can always be responsible for bearing the conflict of his conscience. Deconstruction leaves us the problem and tells us to live, not simply with, but into it - to lean into the paradoxical insolubility which results in our conscience.

Derrida's critique of ethics is fundamentally different from the critique of Enlightenment and Nazism we examined in previous authors. Derrida does not critique the fact that the humanities failed to humanize - but rather that any human based ethical system is inevitably caught between fanaticism and collectivism. In some sense this is what rationalist Enlightenment ethics sought to escape from - appeal to authority, to others, or to oneself. It sought to remove the human (or his divine constructions) from the foundation of ethics entirely. Yet, as Hume cogently demonstrated with his is-ought problem, such an approach to ethics is doomed from the start. Instead Derrida's deconstruction of the problem forces us to acknowledge the problem and live into it - to own up to the inescapability of being imperfect beings and to the necessity of personal moral conflict. And in fact such personal moral conflict is no true horror because, as Frankl says, "as long as man is capable of conflict of conscience, he will be immune to fanaticism and to collectiv[ism]."[9] With conflict of conscience it becomes much harder to justify physical conflict. It is no wonder, then, that Hitler sought to eradicate the Jews given that he thought "conscience is a Jewish invention."[10] Instead of miring in the paradoxical contradiction between fanaticism and collectivism let us be grateful that we can choose to suffer from conscience - that voice of G-d - instead of from collective fanaticism, or in a word, Nazism.

[9] Frankl, Viktor. *The Doctor and The Soul*. New York, Random House, 1946, pp. xxiii
[10]Quoted in: Steiner, George. *In Blue Beard's Castle: Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture*, Faber & Faber, London, 1978, pp. 45