

5. Encore: Inheriting Enlightenment, Betraying Enlightenment

'There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.'
Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*²⁵⁹

5.1. Mapping the Spectrographic Movements

Spectres of Kant: the title of a text is supposed to crystallise the point where the internal movements constituting its flow interlace. The title of a text is itself a text, that is, a product of weaving ('texere' in Latin means 'to weave'), a knot formed by the resonance of the argumentative lines developed progressively or through implicit overlap. If we indeed perceive the title as a text, as a *point de capiton* in which different argumentative threads interlace, which threads comprise the knot of this title? *Spectres of Kant*: how are we to understand this urge towards a spectrography? A certain ambiguity seems to lurk within the title's texture, an undecidability as to whether we should read 'Kant' as an objective genitive (as haunted by spectres) or as a subjective genitive (as the incarnated spectre that haunts). The subtitle (*Tracing the Fact of the Other within the Fact of Reason*) seems to encourage prioritising the first reading: it is the Kantian *fact of reason* within which we have tried to unveil a repressed encounter with the Other, it is the Kantian vindication of the moral law that seems haunted by a trauma of exteriority – the *fact of the Other* – irreducible to the canons of rationality. This spectrography can be summed up in three consecutive moments, which we will now outline.

259 Leonard Cohen, 'Anthem', in *The Future* (Columbia Records, 1992).

In the first moment, we aimed to reconstruct the Kantian moral architectonic (what we may, in Levinasian terms, call *Said*). Following Kant's dismissal of the terrain of experience and its natural causality as inadequate to provide a law of absolute practical necessity – owing to the contingency of empirical data – we explored the conceptual possibility opened in the first *Critique*: the possibility of directing our will as intelligible beings according to a special causality, independent of empirical conditions, the causality of *freedom*. Elaborating on the philosophical corpus of freedom, we established its analytic reciprocity with the moral law in the form of the categorical imperative, articulated the latter's different formulas, and proceeded to exhibit the analytical connections between the key conceptual tenets of the Kantian system – *autonomy*, *dignity*, *duty*, and *respect*. Having designated the joints of the system, we examined Kant's different attempts to ground its validity: in the idea of freedom as an inescapable presupposition of deliberation in the *Groundwork*; as a fact of reason in the second *Critique*.

In the second moment, we attempted to show that the *factum* thesis constitutes not only a failed grounding of morality, but also a blind spot in Kant's critical project, to the extent that it embodies a relation to a space beyond reason. Identifying in both dominant interpretations of the fact – as deed of reason and as quasi-intuitionist Event – the self as the par excellence locus of morality's articulation, we detected this primacy as the main symptom of Kant's failure. This insight impelled us, in quasi-deconstructive fashion, to reverse the hierarchy and look for a vindication of morality in the self's encounter with another person, outside her sphere of control. Inspired by the exciting possibilities of this reversal, we brought to the fore Darwall's second-personal re-interpretation of the fact of reason, a re-interpretation which, due to its circularity, further stressed the need to break the barriers of the transcendental ego. Radicalising Darwall's insights, we emphasised, through Levinas and Derrida, that morality can be vindicated only within the self's unmediated exposure to the alterity of the Other, an exposure traumatic insofar as it elicits an unconditional, Infinite responsibility beyond her sovereignty. It is this traumatic summons by

the corporeal vulnerability of the Other (her *Saying*) that stands as the ultra-transcendental – repressed from the logocentric tradition – condition of morality.

In the third moment, we were compelled to examine how the always-already-there ‘third person’ and her claims necessarily lead to a calculation of the Infinite responsibility and its channelling into the construction of rational principles that mediate the coexistence of all those irreducibly singular Others surrounding the self within the political community. On the one hand, it is the ultra-transcendental fact of the Other that enables rational legislation; on the other hand, such fact cannot be thought except in the (non-) form of a trace, insofar as it is inescapably embodied within the structure of a rational system. In this light, we can claim that the ultra-transcendental is also quasi-transcendental in the Derridian sense, for it is conditioned on what it conditions: no principles can be formulated without the pre-originary summons by the Other, no summons can be addressed uninfected by the mediation of the third person and the need for a certain reflective equilibrium. The necessity of reason shall not lead us to the misconception that the trace of the transcendent Other is completely absorbed: its grace does not cease to glow, demanding that we always retain a deconstructive stance towards the universality of rational principles, making them vulnerable to the singular summons of the Other and the exceptions this singularity might call for (what we may call a *traumatised Said*).

Three moments thus seem to have outlined the course of our thought so far, tied together by two threads: a deconstructive shift from the principled Kantian *Said* to the immediacy of the Other’s *Saying* as articulated within the ethics of alterity discourse; a reconstructive move from the an-archic *Saying* towards a traumatised *Said* that incorporates the non-thematisable scar of the Other’s trace. But what, we must ask, inspired those three moments and their interweaving within a textual structure? What served as the source of our motivation to reverse the strict Kantian binarisms (self against other, reason against experience, activity against passivity) and forge them in a new conceptual, quasi-

transcendental logic in which the hierarchy entailed within them has been suspended? Our approach was set in motion by a desire to defend subjectivity and morality, to disengage them from the totalising sphere of the logocentric tradition that annuls the singularity of the subject by approaching it solely through the mediation of rational predicates. In a world of moral bleakness, complexity, and heterogeneity, we claimed that the emergence from our self-imposed immaturity – what Kant calls ‘Enlightenment’ – can only be achieved if we break out of the intellectual security sculpted by the false rational symmetry of the fact of reason, if we take the philosophical risk of encountering difference, of facing the multiple – often contradictory – demands of the singular Others, remaining open to their calls, sensitive to the repressed fact of the Other. In other words: we sought to conceptualise a new modality of subjectivity as embodying a dynamic relation to the fact of the Other, we sought to ‘*uncondition*’ her singularity beyond the structures of logocentrism, to articulate a new kind of *respect* towards her irreducible alterity, to define our *duties* in a way that embraces her *incalculable dignity*.

These are the demands motivating the synthesis of this text, the ethical moment inspiring the spectrographic reading of the Kantian *fact of reason* and the tensions it inserts into the heart of logocentrism. Given, however, that the transgression of the logocentric tradition has been set as the intellectual aim of this study, we are confronted with a disturbing paradox: the emancipation of subjectivity from reason’s totality – through the vindication of her *unconditionality*, through the invocation of a *dignity* not stemming from the neutralising voice of the categorical imperative, through the determination of our *duties* on the basis of a *freedom* itself freed from the impersonal canons of rationality – implies that the path we are following towards rupturing logocentrism’s dominance is itself paved with an employment of the very linguistic resources of the tradition we wish to overcome. As we sought to display in our analysis of the Kantian architectonic, the aforementioned concepts – *unconditionality*, *dignity*, *respect*, *duty*, *freedom* – signifying the transcendence of the Other in the discourse of Levinas

and Derrida are, at the same time, the fundamental moral tenets of the enlightened logocentric deontology that we wish to transgress. Does this paradox castrate our ambition to move beyond Kantianism?

In 'Violence and Metaphysics', his deconstructive reading of Levinas' attempt in *Totality and Infinity* to speak of an ethics radically untouchable by the ontological tradition it sought to transcend, Jacques Derrida showed that the Levinasian discourse on alterity was itself dependent on the totalities it sought to overcome – namely Heideggerian ontology, Husserlian phenomenology, and Hegelian dialectic. Derrida's point becomes relevant to our approach insofar as we are obliged to confront the impossibility of entirely uprooting ourselves from the Kantian discourse we wish to overcome. The only way forward is to come to terms with the following paradoxical double bind: since there is no thought outside or beyond language, the only possible route towards breaking through the logocentric language we have inherited is to remain within its tradition and attempt to etch ruptures through the very linguistic resources we already possess. The question of simultaneously belonging to a tradition and rupturing it is what Derrida defines as the question of 'closure' (cloture),²⁶⁰ and it is precisely this delicate balance that forces the deconstructor to follow 'an oblique and perilous movement, constantly risking falling back within what is deconstructed',²⁶¹ belonging to the same tradition she wishes to overcome.²⁶²

The exposure of our inescapable bind to Kantian logocentrism – the very lieu we sought to overcome through the ideas of Levinas and Derrida – highlights a thread traversing our text from its very beginning; a thread so deeply ensheathed in our thought that it becomes indiscernible at times. 'Might not the categorical imperative be something that we can no longer avoid?'²⁶³ wonders Jean-Luc Nancy; might it not be a gift we have passively received and cannot now ostracise from

260 Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', 110.

261 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 14.

262 For an excellent discussion of the problematic of closure within Derrida's work and its place in Derrida's readings of Husserl and Heidegger, see Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 59–106.

263 Nancy, 'The Kategorein of Excess', 133.

our logos, a gift that has poisoned (vergiftet) our language? On such a view, if we take a look back at the title of the thesis, the ‘Spectres of Kant’ refer not only to the hauntedness of the Kantian system by the trace of Otherness, but also to the way the Kantian spirit haunts the very discourse that seeks to deconstruct him: ‘Kant’, in the title, functions simultaneously as objective and subjective genitive – as a *haunted spectre*.

Giving a full overview of the way the Kantian heritage has left its mark on the work of Levinas and Derrida does not fall within the scope of our analysis. What matters for the further unfolding of our argument is that they both explicitly understand their thought as inheriting the categorical character of morality, yet both feel compelled to radicalise this heritage – to *betray* it – by moving beyond its logocentric grounding. Levinas explicitly acknowledges his philosophical debt to Kantianism to which he feels ‘particularly close’²⁶⁴ insofar as it finds a meaning in the human without measuring it by ontology and outside the question ‘What is there here...?’.²⁶⁵ The sharp distinction between ‘ought’ and ‘is’, the liberation of *Persönlichkeit* from the latter and the manifestation of her freedom only through the former – namely the voice of morality echoing within her (a manifestation which, as we saw, was not possible through an appeal to theoretical consciousness, justifying thereby what Kant calls the primacy of practical over theoretical reason) – constitute the firm terrain on which Levinas develops his own philosophical variations.²⁶⁶ Similar is the Kantian influence on Derrida’s thought: ‘I am ultra-Kantian. I am Kantian, but more than Kantian’,²⁶⁷ claims Derrida, who inherits from Kant – among others – his faith in the unconditional (a word that Derrida uses ‘not

264 Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Is Ontology Fundamental?’, in *Entre Nous*, 10.

265 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 129.

266 On the Kantian primacy of practical reason over theoretical and its proximity with Levinasian ethics, see Peter Atterton, ‘The Proximity between Levinas and Kant: The Primacy of Pure Practical Reason’, *The Eighteenth Century* 40, no. 3 (1999): 244–260, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41468195>.

267 Richard Kearney, ‘On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida’, in *Questioning God*, ed. John Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Indiana University Press, 2001), 66.

by accident to recall the character of the categorical imperative in its Kantian form')²⁶⁸ and his allergy to moral relativism,²⁶⁹ an allergy that, as in Levinas' case, can be traced back to rejecting the reduction of morality to a conflict of ontological interests.

Our intention is not to present Levinas and Derrida as anarchic heirs of Kant: even though such an approach to their relationship would be of great philosophical interest, it lies beyond the reach of this study. Turning back to the intellectual aims of this text, considering the exhaustion of logocentrism – its inability to provide convincing answers for the vindication of subjectivity within the totality of reason – we will attempt to show in the remainder of this chapter how central Kantian concepts can be invigorated and reach their full philosophical potential through their reiteration with a difference within the ethics of alterity discourse; through, in other words, the invagination into their intellectual corpus of a cryptic trace, the fact of the Other's summons. Recalling the words of Leonard Cohen in *Anthem*, it is only by etching a crack in the closure of reason – the crack of Otherness – that the light can get in. Paraphrasing Derrida: *Perhaps it would be a matter of saving Enlightenment.*

5.2. An Invigoration of Enlightened Concepts

What drove this study from its very beginning was an *unconditional* desire to defend subjectivity: to release her from the prison of any discourse that hijacks her singularity by reducing it to an interchangeable moment within a system; to re-personify her by delineating a standing not endowed by any overarching impersonal forces – such as God, Power, or Being – a standing *unconditional*. Kant's attempt to

268 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, (Northwestern University Press, 1988), 152.

269 Derrida persistently renounces his characterisation as a relativist, despite the fact that deconstruction is not compatible with pre-articulated sound norms, on the argument that respect towards the singularity of the Other is an absolute command, itself not subject to relativistic disputes. See Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility', 78.

defend the unconditional – a cause that is itself uncaused – leads us back to the third antinomy of reason, as presented in the first *Critique*. As explained, this antinomy seeks to establish a dynamic system of causal linkage, illustrating how all effects are linked to their causes. The thesis affirms the existence of an exceptional element that, while being present in the series as a condition whose effects may be perceived in the world, is itself unconditioned: the existence of this unique element is equivalent to what Kant calls ‘freedom’.²⁷⁰ According to the antithesis, there is no freedom, but ‘everything in the world occurs solely according to laws of nature’.²⁷¹ Kant resolves this seeming contradiction – and thus preserves the possibility of the unconditioned, namely, of freedom – by distinguishing two standpoints within subjectivity. As sensible beings, we are inescapably bound by the laws of nature; as intelligible beings, however, we may be subject to a different causality, the causality of freedom.

If theoretical reason maintains the possibility of freedom – as the existence of a cause that is itself uncaused – it is practical reason, on Kant’s account, that enables the subject to stand against the phenomenal causal flow, endowing her with the ‘power to begin’. According to the schema adopted by Simon Critchley, the core structure of what we call ethical subjectivity is brought about by an *ethical experience*:²⁷² an encounter with an incomprehensible fact that evokes her responsibility. The fact that, according to Kant, makes us aware of our freedom – its ‘ratio cognoscendi’ – and thereby constitutes us as subjects is the voice of the categorical imperative residing within us: the sole *fact of reason*, which imposes itself on us as a synthetic a priori proposition.²⁷³ The imperative, denuded of any sensible motives that would make it a conditioned/hypothetical means towards achieving a certain end, ultimately enjoins rational beings to guide their will only according to the universal form of the law so that absolute practical necessity can be

270 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A444/B472.

271 Ibid., A445/B473.

272 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 9.

273 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:31.

achieved. Universalisation is an obligation, and it is precisely this obligation that animates the causality of freedom embodied in the subject – by demanding that she transcend her phenomenal inclinations and the deterministic causal flow they impose. The capacity to be an agent, namely the capacity of self-determination, is inherent in the subject, endowed by the a priori command of reason that resides within her. Given that responsiveness to morality as the obligation to universalise is an a priori predicate of the self, the Kantian agent occupies the space of the unconditioned cause without any reference to external forces – she is autoposited.

Our deconstructive reading of Kant aimed to disrupt the a priori self-certainty of the Kantian subject by exposing how the fact of reason implants within reason's economy a trace of excess, an exteriority imprinted within reason's thematising activity. In re-interpreting the factum thesis – employing Darwall's second-personal account as a stepping stone – we developed the position that reason's activity in producing a principle like the categorical imperative is itself conditioned on the ego's encounter with the Other and her non-conceptualisable vulnerability: prior to and beyond any command addressed by reason in the form of a principle, the ego has *always already* been commanded by the Other person. At this point, to borrow Levinas' words, 'we are trying to express the unconditionality of the subject, which does not have the status of a principle',²⁷⁴ that is, the unconditionality of a 'Yes' to an exposure prior to spontaneity,²⁷⁵ the non-sovereign 'unconditionality of being a hostage',²⁷⁶ or, in Derridian terms, the unconditionality of a gift which 'does not obey the principle of reason', remaining thus a stranger to formal morality.²⁷⁷ Disputing the subjective autoposition as arbitrary, Levinas and Derrida allow us to sketch the outline of a decentred agency that obtains her unconditional standing not 'in

274 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 116.

275 Ibid., 122.

276 Ibid., 128.

277 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (The University of Chicago Press, 1992). 156.

the auto-affection of a sovereign ego',²⁷⁸ but only as a response to an ultra-transcendental ethical obsession by the Other – what we have called the *fact of the Other*.²⁷⁹

The unconditional exposure to the frail Other is not an Event that can be thematised or re-presented by consciousness, precisely because it never belonged to the realm of temporal succession: the order has been 'breathed in unbeknownst to me',²⁸⁰ like a thief, during a diachronic past that cannot be recuperated because of its incommensurability with the present.²⁸¹ The obsession of the self by the Other reveals itself only retroactively in the non-form of a *trace*, of a trauma in the corpus of every identity which at once inspires and destabilises it. The fact of the Other constitutes the ultra-transcendental condition of the fact of reason, yet it can only be crystallised as a disruption within reason: *the conditioned conditions its condition*, the ultra-transcendental is, therefore, also – as noted earlier – quasi-transcendental. The disturbing presence of the Other's incalculable alterity within the sameness of reason – what Levinas calls *psyche* – would not be, as Derrida underlines, an 'irrationalism', but 'another way of keeping within reason, however mad it might appear'.²⁸² Even though we cannot and must not forgo Enlightenment – what imposes itself as a desire for elucidation, for critique, and reflective vigilance – we must nonetheless

278 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 123.

279 On the way Levinas and Derrida radicalise the Kantian unconditional through the pre-originary exposure of the ego to the Other, see Mark Cauchi, 'Unconditioned by the Other: Agency and Alterity in Kant and Levinas', *Idealistic Studies* 45, no. 2 (2015): 125–147, <https://doi.org/10.5840/idstudies20161441> and Dylan Shaul, 'Faith in/as the Unconditional: Kant, Husserl, and Derrida on Practical Reason', *Derrida Today* 12, no. 2 (2019): 171–191, <https://doi.org/10.3366/drt.2019.0208>.

280 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 148.

281 Ibid., 11.

282 Derrida, *Rogues*, 153. For Derrida's invigorative approach to reason, especially in *Rogues*, see Neil Saccamano, 'Inheriting Enlightenment, or Keeping Faith with Reason in Derrida', *Eighteenth Century Studies* 40, no. 3 (2007): 405–424, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2007.0031> and Peter Gratton, 'Derrida and the Limits of Sovereign Reason: Freedom, Equality but not Fraternity', *Telos* 148 (2009): 141–159, <https://www.doi.org/10.3817/0909148141>.

betray reason's unconditionality and restore our faith in the trauma inscribed within its surface. It is by keeping faith with the crack of the Other that we can keep faith with reason.

Our brief analysis of the unconditioned condition within the causal flow compels us now to re-examine the texture of the causal chain's initiating link. Kant's negative definition of freedom in the *Groundwork* as a form of causality other than the one *heteronomously* imposed by the mechanism of natural necessity²⁸³ is converted into a positive one by pointing out that freedom is itself not lawless; if the will is to avoid the heteronomy of sensible motives, it must be its own condition by legislating its own law, by being, in other words, *autonomous*.²⁸⁴ Autonomy, in turn, as the property of the will to begin a series of occurrences from itself, is rendered possible only when the subject strips her subjective principle of volition of any sensible inclinations and is, hence, left with nothing to guide her will but the universal form of the law that can only be represented by the faculty of reason.²⁸⁵ Hence, we arrive at a threefold analytic equivalence: to be free as autonomous is to abide by the law of universality (as articulated in the categorical imperative), which, in turn, is equivalent to acting according to the ends set by the voice of reason within one's breast.

The way Kant revolutionises our perception of freedom is not to be underestimated: counterintuitively, freedom does not correspond to an ontological naïveté, to the frivolity of a being that wanders in the world having the power to solipsistically appropriate its resources, transgressing any external boundaries that would hinder such appropriation. Kantian freedom – reason's spontaneity in determining one's action – manifests itself as a power to obligate. As Mark Cauchi observes, 'the law which the will must obey in order to be properly free (i.e., autonomous) is a law which obligates the subject to consider others (and so is equally a *moral law*)'.²⁸⁶ But in which sense is the subject

283 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:446.

284 Ibid., 4:447.

285 Ibid.

286 Cauchi, 'Unconditioned by the Other: Agency and Alterity in Kant and Levinas', 127.

necessarily considering others when deliberating autonomously? It is because, as Cauchi continues, ‘my pure reason and pure will ... are structurally equivalent to the pure reason and pure will of all others’.²⁸⁷ This means that, whenever I set ends autonomously, I necessarily deliberate consistently with the ends set autonomously by all others, for the voice determining those ends – the voice of reason – is a priori present within all agents.²⁸⁸ The fact, however, that autonomy allows the moral interface with the rational claims of others shall not urge us to think that it is inherently intersubjective: if a subject is to be free, she must not be motivated by anything outside herself. Her relations to others belong to the realm of experience and have no influence on the sovereign, transcendental status of the agent who actively directs her will deaf to external summonses – namely, summonses that are not mediated by the voice of the moral law within her.

Whereas Kant’s reading of autonomy as essentially encapsulating moral obligation has undoubtedly worked as a source of inspiration for Levinas and Derrida, at the same time, the sovereign power to begin, the self’s autopoosition and capacity to actively manage her passions without stepping out of herself, is precisely the point where the ethics of alterity discourse parts ways with Kantian deontology. ‘What must be thought’, writes Derrida in the closing pages of *Rogues*, ‘is this inconceivable and unknowable thing, a freedom that would no longer be the power of a subject, a freedom without autonomy, a heteronomy without servitude, in short, something like a passive decision.’²⁸⁹ It is this thinking of the impossible that motivated the exposure of logocentrism’s exhaustion within this study, its inability to provide convincing responses on how the self-constitution of the subject is possible – its hauntedness ‘by a voice afar’. It is this imperative to think of the unthought that forced us to trace in the very heart of the sovereign subject a passion, a trauma, a *heteronomous* call by the Other’s suffering, subjecting the ego to the point of obsession and constituting her thereby as a subject.

287 Ibid.

288 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:427.

289 Derrida, *Rogues*, 152.

And it is indeed an oxymoron that the defence of subjectivity we have attempted through the lens of the ethics of alterity ultimately speaks of an identity in the state of an irrecoverable malady, 'restlessness, insomnia',²⁹⁰ and persecution. Yet, it is precisely this restlessness that, according to Levinas' hyperbolic conceptual gaze, drives the subject 'out of the nucleus of her substantiality',²⁹¹ preventing her from being riveted to her own being.

The order of the Other, addressed to me in a transcending diachrony incommensurable with the present, is an order I find within me 'anachronously'.²⁹² The moment I stand in the world, the moment I encounter all the Others and their irreducibly singular demands that surround me, I find within myself a law gifted to me beyond my consent, inspiring me to legislate. The moment I come to distance myself from the obsession I endure from the Other in order to rationally synchronise the claims of the multiple Others in an intelligible system, the pre-original heteronomy reverts into autonomy.²⁹³ Autonomy, according to Levinas, consists in the possibility of 'receiving the order out of myself'²⁹⁴ and saying it by 'my own voice'.²⁹⁵ In my voice however, in my voice that becomes the legislator of rational principles within the framework of the moral community, it is the voices, the plural demands of the singular Others, that resonate – demands that require me to bring them in a state of equilibrium. The self (autos) legislating could be described as the lieu where the multiple Others (heteroi) and their claims reverberate, a fact that never allows the subject to withdraw within the enclosure of her being, a fact that allows us to speak about a reconciliation between autonomy and heteronomy,²⁹⁶ to the extent that, as Derrida contends, it is this heteronomy that 'opens autonomy

290 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 64.

291 Ibid., 142.

292 Ibid., 148.

293 Ibid.

294 Ibid.

295 Ibid., 147.

296 Ibid., 148. Basterrea describes this reconciliation with the term 'auto-heteronomy'. Basterrea, *The Subject of Freedom*, 131.

on to itself', being 'a figure of its heartbeat'.²⁹⁷ Given that the Others within the self can never be absorbed in the synchronicity of a rational system, to be really free, even within the framework of the community, means to never totally become enslaved to the rationality of impersonal principles, to have the courage to abandon them, to decide without the mediation of a standard deliberative route, deconstruct and reconstruct them with an eye to serving the unconditional demand for justice. It is precisely because the self (autos) lies in the limit between the law of Infinite responsibility and the rational law into which the former must be channelled – or, as Basterra elegantly puts it, 'between inspiration and expiration'²⁹⁸ – that autonomy must always stay in a state of creative undecidability, of hesitation, and negotiation between the unconditional and the conditional.

The idea that it is the voice of the moral law within us that 'unconditions' us, that frees us from our sensible nature and endows us with our standing in the world, elucidates the concept that most clearly crystallises this standing: *dignity*. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant defines dignity as the status possessed by human beings regarded as *persons*, that is, as subjects of practical reason, by which they can exact respect from all other rational beings in the world.²⁹⁹ What allows persons to demand a minimum of respect is precisely what Sussman calls the 'authority of humanity':³⁰⁰ their ability as rational beings to sacrifice their inclinations and interests, to transcend their phenomenal nature, and be elevated to the noumenal sphere which is revealed through the command of the moral law echoing within them. If dignity is, within Kant's architectonic, grounded in autonomy³⁰¹ – the ability of rational beings to obey no other law than which they give to themselves – it follows as a corollary that dignity is not a normative quality that can be weighed, put in a calculus and, compared to other values – be, in

297 Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 69.

298 Basterra, *The Subject of Freedom*, 134.

299 Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:435.

300 David Sussman, 'The Authority of Humanity', *Ethics* 113, no. 2 (2003): 350–366, <https://doi.org/10.1086/342856>.

301 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:436.

other words, treated as a means towards achieving another end. As Kant highlights, dignity has no price:³⁰² it is *incalculable*, of absolute worth, inviolable, in the sense that it provides the condition of moral coexistence, a condition itself unconditioned and, thus, transcendently immune from injuries to its status. Humanity in our faces must categorically be treated as an end in itself, untouched by calculation, however noble the opposing end might be.³⁰³

If dignity can be grasped as the normative quality stemming from our capacity of self-determination, it is no wonder that Kant, as Catherine Chaliier accurately points out, ‘never evokes the dignity of the particular individual (Würde des Menschen) or human dignity (menschliche Würde), but only the dignity of humanity (Würde der Menschheit)’.³⁰⁴ Since dignity elicits the feeling of respect, the object of respect in the face of the other is not her alterity, but that which makes her similar to the self: her *humanity*, that is, her capacity to be the author of the moral law. By taking a step back from her phenomenal interests, the Kantian agent identifies the other as an *alter ego* – an end in itself – establishing a symmetrical relation of reciprocity under the force of the moral law’s command as a fact of pure practical reason. To possess the status of dignity means to have the competence to acknowledge the dignity of the other – both grounded in the moral elevation established by the universal voice of the moral law. Our sovereign capacity to interact by adopting a firm deliberative standpoint from which we can rationally evaluate the reciprocal demands addressed to one another is what, in Kant’s thought, enables the construction of the moral community in the image of a *kingdom of ends*, a systematic uni-

302 Ibid., 4:434–435.

303 Intuitively, one thinks of Jean Genet, the (in)famous French poet who chose to become an outlaw not merely to satisfy his needs, but from a deeply rooted disregard for society’s conformist values. Would a revolution of social sleepiness justify violating a person’s integrity? From the perspective of Kant’s doctrine of the incalculability of dignity, undoubtedly not.

304 Catherine Chaliier, *What Ought I to do? Morality in Levinas and Kant*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cornell University Press, 2002), 17.

on of rational beings, who, by transcending their particularity, organise their coexistence according to common objective laws.³⁰⁵

The incalculable character of humanity is an Enlightenment ideal that has decisively shaped the normative self-perception of Western political and legal communities. At the same time, however, it is haunted by an irresolvable paradox: while dignity is conceived by Kant as incalculable – not subject to being weighed against other values – its deduction from the *fact of the moral law* raises doubts. Perhaps the very impossibility of measuring humanity depends on a violent measurement: a deprivation of singularity, an imposition of an a priori symmetry based on the fact of reason, which, under our deconstructive reading, resembles a rational imperialism. In view of the above, the *dignity of humanity* seems like a transcendental mask, a *persona*, that absorbs the subject's singularity within an impersonal discourse. This is precisely the spirit of the Levinasian critique against transcendental idealism according to which 'the Other and I function as elements of an ideal calculus ... and approach one another under the dominance of ideal necessities which traverse them from all sides'.³⁰⁶ If what is at stake for Levinas is to give subjectivity back her 'highest dignity',³⁰⁷ given her own 'disappearance' as a moment necessary for the manifestation of a structure,³⁰⁸ such a vindication can occur only by transcending the very discourse that consumes her.

'Pure morality must exceed all calculation',³⁰⁹ writes Derrida, outlining the direction of this transcendence. If dignity, within the Kantian architectonic, takes the form of the right to demand respect, grounded in the capacity to sacrifice one's sensible interests before the imperative of the moral law, the ethics of alterity discourse pushes the notion of sacrifice to its logical extreme: in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas describes the encounter with the face of the Other as demanding an

305 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:433.

306 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 216.

307 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Humanism and An-archy', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 130.

308 Ibid., 129–130.

309 Derrida, *Passions*, 26.

expropriation of one's existence to the point of haemorrhage, while Derrida portrays the self's bond to the Other's singularity as entailing the risk of absolute sacrifice.³¹⁰ Dignity, under this perspective, shall be conceived as the absence of every calculus, as the self's election³¹¹ and overflowing by the anarchic responsibility for the vulnerability of the radically Other that cannot be measured or defined by any a priori principles. The incalculability of morality stemming from the absence of a priori principles measuring responsibility implies that the status of the agents is radically asymmetrical: my dignity commands me to sacrifice everything towards the dignity of the Other without expecting any reciprocity.³¹² Even when, through the Other's eyes, I discern the glance of the third person crying out for justice and thereby temper the thralldom I endure from the Other in order to obtain what Levinas calls 'the dignity of a citizen',³¹³ this status never hardens into an inviolable form. Precisely because the Other's demand cannot be fixed in a rigid mould, I can never claim to have done enough, never withdraw into the secure possession of a status. Within my subjective structure glows and will glow the disturbing trace of the *incalculable*: of a responsibility for the wholly Other that endows me with my standing and at the same time requires its sacrifice in *autoimmune* fashion.

The exploration of the concept of dignity inevitably leads us to another crucial concept: *respect*. Nancy understands respect as the very alteration of the subject's position and structure, that is, the way in which the ego responds to the alterity of the law within, thereby becoming a subject.³¹⁴ Kant's notion of respect expresses the impact of the law's imperative on the subject: it is a unique feeling, 'brought about by an intellectual ground', one that is not of empirical origin,

310 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 68.

311 Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture', in *Entre Nous*, 187.

312 '... pure ethics, if there is any, begins with the respectable dignity of the other as an absolute unlike, recognized as non-recognizable, indeed as unrecognizable, beyond all knowledge, all cognition, and all recognition...' Derrida, *Rogues*, 60.

313 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Peace and Proximity', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 168.

314 Nancy, 'The Kategorein of Excess', 147.

but ‘cognized a priori’.³¹⁵ But in what way does it alter our subjective position? It does so insofar as ‘it lets us discover the sublimity of our own supersensible existence’,³¹⁶ while at the same time ‘striking down self-conceit’.³¹⁷ Respect thus intertwines two moments: an elevation to the intelligible sphere (or: a freedom *to* obey the moral law) and a humiliation of empirical reason’s ambition to legislate (or: a freedom *from* our sensible motives).

Kant is adamant that ‘respect is always directed to persons, never to things’.³¹⁸ What is it in the face of the other that elicits my respect? Shall we, for instance, assume that the object of our respect is the other person’s vulnerability, her physical exposure to wounds and pain? In Kant’s thought, the sensible immediacy of the other’s presence might produce various feelings such as sympathy, yet those remain pathological and, as such, cannot enter the field of morality. Only the moral person’s inner certainty that, in standing before the other, she is in the presence of another moral agent elicits respect in her. In other words: what I respect in myself and the face of the other is our common capacity of self-determination, our ability to guide our will according to the imperative of the moral law residing within us, our ability to sacrifice our empirical interests and deliberate rationally. Respect shall not, therefore, be considered a contingent feature of morality, a feeling merely accompanying the imperative of the moral law without constituting an essential feature of it. Respect is the way the objective moral law – to treat every rational agent as an end in itself – is internalised subjectively, and, in this sense, the moral law and its impact on us are one and the same. This is why Kant insists that the morality of an action consists in its execution *from* duty (aus reiner Pflicht), i.e., because it is practically necessary out of respect for the autonomy of the agents involved. If, on the contrary, an action is externally conformable – that is, in accordance with one’s duty (pflichtsmässig) – but has not

315 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:73.

316 Ibid., 5:88.

317 Ibid., 5:87.

318 Ibid., 5:76.

been executed out of the subject's respect for the law, then it has no inherent moral worth; its only value consists in its mere legality.³¹⁹

Re-examining retroactively the intentions of this thesis, it seems that an invigoration of the notion of respect constituted its invincible centre. If we look into the etymological origin of the term, we will see – as already noted in the introduction – that it comes from the Latin word 'respicere', which means 'to look back' or to 'regard'. Does not giving regard to the fact of reason imply exploring the unintentional possibilities within it, burrowing into it until – to borrow Beckett's expression – 'that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through?'³²⁰ What lurks behind, according to our deconstructive reading, is the face of the Other, lying in a ghostly interspace between presence and absence and haunting the structures of transcendental idealism. In respecting the Other, we would need to look behind the transcendental mask created by the materials of the Kantian moral personality, to disengage her alterity from the machinery of reason, in order to re-personify her and re-attribute her irreplaceable singularity to her. Respecting her would thus not be tantamount to recognising an empty form, but to acknowledging what cannot be acknowledged: her transcendence, her suffering that eludes the philosophical glance trying to pin it down as an object of knowledge, her unique standing, irreducible to a priori predicates. In a nutshell: respect for the Other, as sketched in the ethics of alterity discourse, does not mean recognising a moral form shaping her personality, but being obsessed by her sensible force that overflows the noumenal self.³²¹

319 Ibid., 5:81.

320 Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (eds.), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. I: 1929–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 519.

321 Paying an unfaithful tribute to the categorical imperative, Levinas claimed in an interview to *Le Monde* in 1980 that he particularly likes the categorical imperative in the formula of humanity ('Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end'), in the sense that within this formula 'we are not in the element of pure universality, but already in the presence of the Other'. See Christian Delacampagne, 'Emmanuel Levinas', in *Entretiens*

Of course, as we have striven to make clear several times throughout this text, the anarchic respect for the alterity of the Other must necessarily inspire practical laws, principles, calculation, universality: we need to construct a regulative ideal according to which we will be able to determine our duties – what we owe to each other. This does not mean, however, that within the moral community respect for the law or, in Kantian terms, ‘acting from duty’ becomes the utmost horizon of our thought. Forgetting the Other’s transcendence, entombing it under a monological rule, stifling it under a normative economy of symmetrical relationships – Derrida, citing in *Passions* the etymological analyses of Benveniste and Malamoud, highlights the rootedness of duty in debt in certain languages³²² – might be an object of desire for our finite consciousness, which would thereby recede into itself, protected from its exposure to what exceeds it. Whereas we need laws, these laws must be respected insofar as they provide the route towards respecting the Other. Given, therefore, that responsibility for the Other is not absorbable in the universality of a principle, the rule fetishism of ‘acting from duty’ has to remain the object of a certain deconstructive vigilance. For it is not the law that we respect in the Other, but the trace of the Other that we respect in the law.

avec ‘Le Monde’. 1. *Philosophies* (La Découverte/Le Monde, 1984), 146. Cited in Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 58, n. 58.

322 Derrida, *Passions*, 27–29. A comprehensive study of Derrida’s reading of Kantian morality can be found in Jacques de Ville, ‘The Moral Law: Derrida reading Kant’, *Derrida Today* 12, no. 1 (2019): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.3366/drt.2019.0194>.