

Interpretation of the pre-ethical difference

On the problem of nature and violence in (the work of) Jacques Derrida.

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Ethics is *the* human characteristic. In hardly any other area does it become clear what sets man apart from all other beings, animals or even plants, than in the fact that man does not only act, but even more reflects about his deeds and distinguishes good from evil. Here, thus, it remains ambivalent whether man himself – based on pure autonomy – creates laws (rules) of his actions and chooses freely or whether he is bound to certain laws, which are given and withdrawn, by someone else.

On the background of this roughly summarized debate between autonomy and heteronomy the following thoughts focus on some remarks by Jacques Derrida. He did not – maybe wrongfully¹ – go down in history as a philosopher of ethics, yet he dealt with the relation of nature and violence from the beginning of his literary work on. Derrida's position stretches between his critic of the metaphysical focus of the Occident on the idea of presence (1) and, consequently, his subtle critic of Emmanuel Levinas' position: Not only goodness and, thus, ethics have to be considered before the subject, but – together with ethics – its violation, i.e. war (2). If the pre-ethical origin of ethics is *per se* indifferent, then all ethics lies in the interpretation of difference that can also be found in the pre-ethical origin (3).

1. Against the ontology of substance

According to Hegel it has become philosophically en vogue to ostentatiously criticize the occidental way of thinking and to characterize one's own approach as "the big alternative". Derrida, too, shares this attitude and uses the popular topos of criticizing and rethinking everything. This topos can also be discovered in the works of such diverse thinkers as Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas and many more.

In *La voix et le phénomène – Voice and Phenomenon*² (1967) Derrida for the first time presents his critic of logo- and phonocentrism, which can also be found in his

¹ Critchley, Simon, *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida and Levinas*, Oxford 1992; *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity*, London 1999.

² Derrida, Jacques, *La voix et le phénomène. Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Paris 1967; *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. by Leonard Lawlor, (Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy), Evanston/Ill. 2011.

collection of essays *De la grammatology – Of Grammatology*³ (1967) creating a relation between truth and voice, a relation which realizes and acknowledges truth as present.

“All the metaphysical determinations of truth ... are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos ... Within this logos, the original and essential link to the *phonè* has never been broken.”⁴

Derrida criticizes an idea of the subject, which is concentrated on consciousness and is constituted from voice: “The voice *is* consciousness.”⁵ Here the subject is conceived as thinking itself presently,⁶ because while thinking it can hear itself speak with its own voice: “The system of ‘bearing (understanding)-oneself-speak’”⁷. Derrida criticizes this kind of logo- and phonocentrism and explains that all self-presence of the subject is characterized by the possibility of non-presence, because every subject is mortal.⁸ According to Derrida one only grasps the right notion of subjectivity when not reducing it to the presence of consciousness, but at the same time acknowledges the not-presence of the subjection unto time. In *Grammatology* Derrida speaks out for all that has been suppressed and marginalised and develops the science of writing against the precedence of the voice: The former stands for all that is left out during the process of thinking, which is suppressed, which is not or cannot be brought o consciousness. While doing so, Derrida hints at the fact that even voice and especially consciousness cannot exist absolutely, but are both founded on a material basis.

Together with the phonocentrism, Derrida criticizes the marginalisation of the individualizing difference. A subject which can hear itself speak while thinking constructs time-transcendent ideal notions and assorts things, that appear to itself, to those notions. This assorting is relatively vague which leads to a loss of details of the things, which have appeared to the subject. Thus, those details are not realised. Time-transcendent ideal notions allow the subject to think the same thought every time and in every place and to be able to repeat the same. “Ideality is the salvation or the mastery of presence in repetition. In its purity, this presence is the presence of nothing that exists in the world; it is in correlation with acts or repetition which are themselves ideal.”⁹

³ Derrida, Jacques, *De la grammatology*, Paris 1967; *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore 1976.

⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 10f.

⁵ Derrida, *Voice*, 68.

⁶ Derrida, *Voice*, 37: “As for the certainty of internal existence, it has no need, Husserl thinks, of being signified. It is immediately present to itself.”

⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 7.

⁸ Derrida, *Voice*, 60f: “The appearing of the *I* to itself in the *I am* is therefore a relation to its own possible disappearance. *I am* means therefore originally *I am mortal*.”

⁹ Derrida, *Voice*, 8. Cp. *ibid.*, 65: “The ideal object is the most objective of objects; it is independent of the *hic et nunc* of events and of the acts of the empirical subjectivity who intends it. The ideal object can be repeated, to infinity, while remaining the same.” Cp. Lawlor, Leonard, Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology, (Studies in Continental Thought), Bloomington / In. 2002, 191.

It is only a matter of being consequent if Derrida does not only reject the ideality of thoughts, but at the same time poses a “task to think about” to classical metaphysics, which cannot solve this task within its own frame of thinking.

In a very far-fetching argument with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Derrida goes even one step further: He does not only criticize Rousseau’s notion of nature because it is an ideal notion, but most of all because it is a culturally defined term. In a culturally agreed act a supplement is put in the place of the meant notion and this supplement is conceived as being the “real one” afterwards.¹⁰ Derrida criticizes this act of suppressing, substituting, supplementing and again speaks out for all that has been degraded as secondary: Writing and voice fulfil the same function of representation without either of them being less important than the other.¹¹ However, Derrida prefers the “metaphor” of writing or arche-writing: Due to their non-presence in the written word and their materiality, writing or arche-writing allow for an escape from the never-ending connection of reference between (idealised) supplement to supplement. Since Derrida cannot find any outside of text in Rousseau’s work,¹² he himself tries to think *différance* by means of arche-writing and trace.¹³ This *différance* does neither consider the supplement as the real meaning nor does it causally conclude back to a time-transcendent ideal. From this point of view, Derrida (though he himself might well deny it) wants to acknowledge the need for transcendental philosophy, i.e. its way of reasoning and finding arguments, without being able to define transcendentials themselves on the basis of thinking – all this acknowledgement being an act of postmetaphysical metaphysics.¹⁴

2. Violence and metaphysics (Emmanuel Levinas)

In his outstandingly prudent essay *Violence et métaphysique – Violence and metaphysics*¹⁵ Derrida has early dealt with the until then published work of Emmanuel Levinas, a fact which has not missed its effect on the latter. Both thinkers were ex-

¹⁰ Derrida, Derrida, Of grammatology, 240: “Speech never gives the thing itself, but a simulacrum that touches us more profoundly than the truth, ‘strikes’ us more effectively. Another ambiguity in the appreciation of speech. It is not the presence of the object which moves us but its phonic sign”.

¹¹ Cp. Derrida, Of Grammatology, 144f.

¹² Cp. Derrida, Of Grammatology, 158.

¹³ Derrida, Of grammatology, 167: „The concept of origin or nature is nothing but the myth of addition, of supplementarity annulled by being purely additive. It is the myth of the effacement of the trace, that is to say of an originary difference that is neither absence nor presence, neither negative nor positive.”

¹⁴ Cp. Llewelyn, John, Levinas, Derrida and Others vis-à-vis, in: Bernasconi, Robert / Wood, David (Ed.), The Provocation of Levinas. Rethinking the Other, London a.a. 1988, 136–155, 146.

¹⁵ First published: Derrida, Jacques, Violence et métaphysique. Essai sur la pensée d’Emmanuel Lévinas, in: Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale 69 [Nr. 3+4 1964] 322–354; 425–473. Revised: L’écriture et la différence, Paris 1967, 117–228; Violence and Metaphysics. An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas, in: Writing and Difference, trans. by Alan Bass, Chicago 1978, 79–153.

changing their ideas during their lifetime (and beyond).¹⁶ Derrida's influence on Levinas is notable, e.g. in the different style of writing of *Totalité et Infini – Totality and Infinity* and *Autrement qu'être – Otherwise than Being*.¹⁷ In ever new approaches in *Violence and Metaphysics* Derrida defends Georg F. W. Hegel and Edmund Husserl as representatives of Greek philosophy against the Jewish Emmanuel Levinas' and his critic on his phenomenological teachers.¹⁸ It corresponds to the practice of deconstruction to take Levinas' writings in the reconstruction very seriously,¹⁹ which will become explicit in the third part of this essay. The most interesting point of the here mentioned question is, whether ethics or ontology, i.e. metaphysics are to be considered as the first science and where violence has its origin.

Levinas commits the crime of "parricide"²⁰ and imputes thinking recognition as a possessive act to Husserl, which would make it impossible to virtually realize the otherness of the other. „The imperialism Metaphysics of theoria already bothered Levinas.”²¹ Levinas confronts this possessive act of recognition with the resistance of the other, who is not willing to be possessed by anyone, but rather means *evpe,keina th/j ouvsi,aj* – from beyond being. As Levinas speaks out against taking possession of the other and making him uniform in the act of cognition, Derrida detects "metaphysics of separation"²² in his work,²³ from which originates radical criticism: "Incapable of re-

¹⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel, *Tout autrement* (sur la philosophie de Jacques Derrida, in: *Noms propres*, Montpellier 1976, 81–89; Jacques Derrida: *Wholly Otherwise*, in: *Proper names*, trans. Michael B. Smith, (Meridian crossing aesthetics), Stanford / Calif. 1996, 55–62.

Derrida, Jacques, *En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici*, in: Place, Jean-Michel (Ed.), *Textes pur Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris 1980, 48–53 = *Psyché. Invention de l'autre*, Paris 1987, 159–202; *At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am*, trans. by Ruben Berezdivin / Peggy Kamuf, in: *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Stanford / Calif. 2007, 143–190.

Derrida, Jacques, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, Paris 1997; *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault / Michael Naas, (Meridian crossing aesthetics), Stanford / Calif. 1999.

¹⁷ Critchley, *Ethics* (1992), 12: „Indeed, if one may speak of the influence of Derrida on Levinas, then it can best be seen perhaps in the way in which, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas is far more conscious of the linguistic and logocentric recoils that arise when the ethical Saying is thematized within the ontological Said.”

¹⁸ Derrida, *Writing*, 99: “Levinas is very close to Hegel, much closer than he admits, and at the very moment when he is apparently opposed to Hegel in the most radical fashion.” “Levinas and Husserl are quite close here.” (125)

¹⁹ Critchley, *Ethics* (1992), 94: „On Derrida's reading, Levinas attempts to escape Greek logocentrism through recourse to a Hebraic origin and a messianic eschatology which are opened from within an experience of alterity which the Greek philosophical tradition can neither reduce nor comprehend.” Cp. Llewelyn, John, *Jewgreek or Greekjew*, in: Sallis, John u.a. (Ed.), *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum the First Ten Years*, (Phaenomenologica 105), Dordrecht 1988, 273–287, 277.

²⁰ Derrida, *Writing*, 89.

²¹ Derrida, *Writing*, 84.

²² Derrida, *Writing*, 87.

²³ Against making the other uniform in the act of enjoyment, Levinas starts to talk about desire, which cannot be sated: “Desire, on the contrary, permits itself to be appealed to by the absolutely irreducible exteriority of the other to which it must remain infinitely inadequate. Desire is equal only to excess. No totality will ever encompass it. Thus, the metaphysics of desire is a metaphysics of infinite separation.” (93)

specting the Being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence.”²⁴ Thus, Levinas advocates for ethics and no longer for ontology to be considered as the first science,²⁵ in order to fight against taking possession of the other by the (recognizing) ego. In this process, the other questions the ego, which means for Levinas that “interrogation ... [is] the only incarnated nonviolence.”²⁶

Derrida again hints at the problem, that the recognition of the otherness of the other in Levinas’ work only represents a shift of the problem. To be able think the otherness of the other, Levinas has to suppress the difference between the ego and the self. “The ego is the same. The alterity or negativity interior to the ego, the interior difference, is but an appearance: an illusion.”²⁷ Levinas has no option left to maintain this difference in the subject; he can only think a difference between the ego and the other; the other, thus, standing into the ego, where there is the only place where the other can be conceived as a point of difference.²⁸ First of all, the ego itself is indifferentiated and unsplit. Since the ego in itself shows no difference without the strange other, Levinas according to Derrida has the problem, that the ego cannot delimit itself against the other²⁹ and is confronted with him immediately.³⁰ The ego cannot defend itself against the other, so to speak, it is absolutely exposed to the other,³¹ in such a way that the other is very close to the ego and yet absolutely different and separated. Through this, the other is the condition of the possibility for, both, murder and loving care: “Only a face can arrest violence, but can do so, in the first place, only because a face can provoke it.”³² Since “[t]he ethical relation is a religious relation” (96), Derrida has to re-

²⁴ Derrida, Writing, 91.

²⁵ Derrida, Writing, 97; 137.

²⁶ Derrida, Writing, 96.

²⁷ Derrida, Writing, 93; *ibid.*, 109: “Now, in *Totality and Infinity*, where the categories of the same and the other return in force, the *vis demonstrandi* and very energy of the break with tradition is precisely the adequation of ego to the same, and of Others to the other ... We have seen this: according to Levinas there would be no interior difference, no fundamental and autochthonous alterity within the ego.”

²⁸ Derrida, Writing, 94: “[S]o the ego cannot engender alterity within itself without encountering the Other.”

²⁹ Cp. Levinas, Emmanuel, *Otherwise than being, or, Beyond essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Pennsylvania 2011, 85: “Signifyingness, the-one-for-the-other, exposedness of self to another, it is immediacy in caresses and in the contact of saying. It is the immediacy of a skin and a face, a skin which is always a modification of a face, a face that is weighted down with a skin.”

³⁰ Derrida, Writing, 90: “Without intermediary and without communion, neither mediate nor immediate, such is the truth or our relation to the other, the truth to which the traditional logos is forever inhospitable.”

³¹ Cp. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 15.

³² Derrida, Writing, 147. Cp. *ibid.*, 104; 107: “In other words, in a world where the face would be fully respected (as that which is not of this world), there no longer would be war. In a world where the face no longer would be absolutely respected, where there no longer would be a face, there would be no more cause for war. God, therefore, is implicated in war ... Therefore war – *for war there is* – is the difference between the face and the finite world without a face. But is not this difference that which has always been called the world, in which the absence-presence of God *plays*?”

proach Levinas with something unacceptable: “God, therefore, is implicated in war.” (107)³³

In the third part of his essay (106–153) Derrida, on his part, tries to get beyond Levinas together with Levinas by taking three steps: For doing so, he first deals with linguistics and, thus, with the human mind’s subjection to tradition (106–118); after that, he tackles the logic of reasoning and the possibility of ethics (118–134), before thinking about new ways of a renewed ontology together with Heidegger (134–153). Which detail of these three steps is of importance for the question of the origin of violence and the possibility of ethics?

1. To begin with, Derrida makes it clear that there is no other language than the one we think and speak in. We have to utilize the given way of thinking and speaking and can only get beyond them together with themselves, but never without them.³⁴

At the same time, there does not exist any other possibility than the linguistic discourse to fight for peace in a relatively non-violent way (116–118), since for Levinas face and language are of the same origin and, therefore, for Derrida the confrontation with the other is always characterized by violence.³⁵ Due to the fact that discourse is a spoken one, Derrida assumes (also in delineation of Levinas)³⁶, that there is a (transcendental) pre-knowledge about the meaning of war and peace.³⁷

2. Concerning possible ethics Derrida sees the problem in Levinas’ thoughts in the latter’s favor for an absolute asymmetry between the ego and the other, which leads to

³³ Cp. Krewani, Wolfgang N., *Ethik, Krieg, Politik. Gestalten des anderen in der Philosophie Lévinas*, in: Orth, Ernst Wolfgang / Lembeck, Karl-Heinz, *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, Hamburg 2001, 79–197, 96: „Krieg setzt die Transzendenz dessen voraus, gegen den er geführt wird. Der Krieg wird gegen ein transzendentes Wesen angestrengt und zielt darauf ab, diese Transzendenz zu vernichten.“

³⁴ E.g. Derrida, *Writing*, 113. Critchley, *Ethics* (1992), 14: “In ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, *Of Grammatology*, and throughout his work, Derrida is trying to explicate certain necessities within discourse which all philosophers, Levinas and Derrida included, are obliged to face. The questions that Derrida addresses to Levinas, then, are questions that address the whole field of philosophical language, within whose parameters the discourse of deconstruction is also inscribed.”

³⁵ Wyschogrod, Edith, Emmanuel Levinas. *The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, The Hague 1974, 211f: “What is critical is that there is not first the face, then language, but a simultaneous upsurge of face, language and responsibility. Language wells up with the face. Yet, in its very appearing, the face undergoes a primordial act of violence.”

³⁶ Atterton, Peter, Levinas and the Language of Peace: A Response to Derrida, in: *Philosophy Today* 36 (1992) 59–70, 60: „The apparent overriding force behind his argument rests with Levinas’ claim that thought is language, that ‘thought consists in speaking’ (Ti40/Ti10). Derrida repeatedly draws on this claim ..., since the question for ethics then becomes how both to think and not think about the Other, how to have any relation with someone (peace) which isn’t mediated by reflection on her or him and *ex hypothesi* language (violence).“

³⁷ Derrida, *Writing*, 121: “Not only nominal definitions but, before them, possibilities of essence which guide all concepts, are presupposed when one speaks of ethics, of transcendence, of infinity, etc. These expressions must have a meaning for concrete consciousness in general, or no discourse and no thought would be possible ... Transcendental neutralization is in principle, by its meaning, foreign to all factuality, all existence in general. In fact it is neither before nor after ethics.”

the fact, that the other must never (as in Husserl) be conceived of as alter ego.³⁸ Derrida, though, has to grant that it might be an act of violence to make the other an object by the intentional act of recognition. However, he asks to consider that this is unavoidable, because language is only possible if the other confronts the ego. According to Derrida one has, thus, to assume “an original, transcendental violence, previous to every ethical choice, even supposed by ethical nonviolence. Is it meaningful to speak of a pre-ethical violence? If the transcendental ‘violence’ to which we allude is tied to phenomenality itself, and to the possibility of language, it then would be embedded in the root of meaning and logos, before the latter had to be determined as rhetoric, psychagogy, demagogy, etc.”³⁹ If language exists and if there is an outside, so if things and other human beings appear to man and confront him, then there necessarily is ‘violence’ – ‘violence’ is printed in inverted commas, because it need not obligatorily be the case of physical violence. However, both the recognition of another human being as other and speaking to the other are acts of violence, according to Derrida, because they pull both the ego and the other out of their solipsism and make them focus on the other. As a consequence, there is no non-violent existence: “War, therefore, is congenital to phenomenality, is the very emergence of speech and of appearing.”⁴⁰

At the same time, the other must be – against Levinas and with Husserl – a different ego, he must be alter ego. “To refuse to see in it an ego in this sense is, within the ethical order, the very gesture of all violence. If the other was not recognized as ego, its entire alterity would collapse.”⁴¹ Before any dissymmetry there has to exist a symmetry between the ego and the alter ego. Here, however, the “other as other” must not be reduced to the ego, since he, as mentioned before, is an alter ego. “The egoity of the other permits him to say ‘ego’ as I do; and this is why he is Other, and not a stone”.⁴²

Derrida summarizes the above explained ideas – the other is an other ego; if there is an ego, there must exist violence – under the term “economy”⁴³ and by doing so, Derrida, maybe absolutely contrary to Levinas, gets to another starting point for ethics. If violence is necessarily implicated in the factual existence of the subject, then it is only within ethics that the subject can face the other in a peaceful gesture. This facing of the other is economic, that is never transcendental or “*absolutely peaceful*”⁴⁴, because it depends on the pre-ethical violence and follows the same. Derrida wishes for a pre-pre-ethical non-violence, he realizes, however, that factual existence has an opposition between the ego and the other in store, which cannot be evaded and, therefore, has to be characterized as pre-ethical or transcendental. Besides, he – in a rather skeptical or culturally pessimistic gesture – regards the facing of the other under the linguistic

³⁸ Derrida, Writing, 123.

³⁹ Derrida, Writing, 125.

⁴⁰ Derrida, Writing, 129.

⁴¹ Derrida, Writing, 125.

⁴² Derrida, Writing, 125.

⁴³ Derrida, Writing, 128f; 148: “One never escapes the economy of war.”

⁴⁴ Derrida, Writing, 128; 146.

conditions of the existent world (which have been explained in the first step) as the way of least use of violence:

“Discourse, therefore, if it is originally violent, can only *do itself violence*, can only negate itself in order to affirm itself, make war upon the war which institutes it without ever *being able* to reappropriate this negativity, to the extent that it is discourse. ... This secondary war, as the avowal of violence, is the least possible violence, the only war to repress the worst violence”.⁴⁵

3. The last step is dedicated to the rehabilitation of ontology.⁴⁶ Derrida points out that there is no absolute being, which can be conceived of as independent from the existent.⁴⁷ Consequently, there can be no ethics that does not include the thinking of the being,⁴⁸ because every ethics is based upon the recognition of the other.⁴⁹ It is of great importance to Derrida, that the being is not of higher value than the existent, since it can only exist in it and through it, which leads to the linguistic character of the being and to the fact, that language and thinking are only possible within the framework of the being.⁵⁰ Since Levinas, however, postulates “the difference between Being and the existent”, but “at the same time as it stifles it”⁵¹, his thinking is based on a difference he cannot assess: “War, perhaps, is no longer even conceivable as negativity.”⁵²

What can we conclude from this passage through the essay *Violence and Metaphysics*?

1. Derrida opposes bad metaphysics, which identifies the infinite over-hastily with God and, thus, draws it down into the sphere of linguistics.⁵³ While arguing like this, Derrida reveals a certain proximity to “negative theology”⁵⁴, the latter allegedly being, however, still too close to the classical discourse and too little ‘contemptuous’.

2. Ethics reacts on the facticity of human existence, which goes along with a certain egoity:

⁴⁵ Derrida, Writing, 130.

⁴⁶ Derrida, Writing, 140.

⁴⁷ Derrida, Writing, 136: “Being, since it is *nothing* outside the existent, a theme which Levinas had commented upon so well previously, could in no way *precede* the existent ... Being is but the *Being-of* this existent, and does not exist outside it as a foreign power, or as a hostile or neutral impersonal element.”

⁴⁸ Derrida, Writing, 141: “Ethico-metaphysical transcendence therefore presupposes ontological transcendence.”

⁴⁹ Derrida, Writing, 137: “Not only is the thought of Being not ethical violence, but it seems that no ethics – in Levinas’s sense – can be opened without it. Thought – or at least the precomprehension of Being – *conditions* ... the *recognition* of the essence of the existent (for example someone, existent as other, as other self, etc.). It conditions the *respect* for the other *as what it is*: other. Without this acknowledgment, which is not a knowledge ... no ethics would be possible.”

⁵⁰ Derrida, Writing, 143.

⁵¹ Derrida, Writing, 144.

⁵² Derrida, Writing, 144.

⁵³ Derrida, Writing, 136.

⁵⁴ Derrida, Writing, 116; 146.

The ego recognizes the world and other subjects as others: “I am not the world and I am not the other, both are strange to me.” At the same time, the ego is open towards the world and the other, which results in the need of facing them. This facing is always an act of violence. Existence is, thus, necessarily violent, making ethics the human (speech)reaction to the pre-ethical, transcendental violence. As a consequence, there will never be a status of absolute non-violence within the earthly economy, but only a containment of violent acts. But this does not mean, Derrida opposes peace, cannot see any sense in it or wouldn’t long for it and write for it. His own attempt to make peace possible can, on the one hand, be detected in his pointing at inconsistencies in traditional metaphysical thinking patterns, which even Levinas was still attached (especially in linguistic terms before *Autrement qu’être – Otherwise than Being*) due to the gesture of disengagement. On the other hand, Derrida – by means of the metaphor of trace and above all arche-writing – tries to think a pre-original “*différance*”, that at least does not make the mistake of suppressing the not wanted and, therefore, being captivated by an irrational violence. This, however, is rather an issue of grammatology, parts of which will be in the center of attention in the following.

3. Violence of the letter (Claude Lévi-Strauss)

Of Grammatology is generally divided into two parts. In the first part (1–93) Derrida describes his “science of writing” (4; 43), which was not possible in logocentrism, because writing was regarded as secondary compared to spoken language. The far longer second part (95–316) offers first of all an examination of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, especially of his essay *Essai sur l’origine des langues – Essay on the Origin of Language*. As transition and connecting link Derrida takes an analysis of one chapter from *Tristes tropiques* by Claude Lévi-Strauss, the (ethnographic) father of structuralism. First and foremost, this link receives its importance from the fact, that Derrida examines structuralism by Lévi-Strauss and distances himself from it,⁵⁵ and, secondly, from the systematically connecting function for both parts of Grammatology stemming from these explanations. After having introduced his programmatic critic on occidental logocentrism and having exercised the same especially in the treatment of Ferdinand de Saussure’s language theory, Derrida in the second part – again with regard to language theory – turns his attention to structuralism and its reference to Rousseau.⁵⁶ With it, Derrida works through two prominent discourses of his time and, thus, makes his own position clear, which differs eminently from Saussure’s, Lévi-Strauss’ or Rousseau’s, while still taking over ideas worth thinking about from them.

As has been explained, Derrida rejects the in his eyes idealistic assumption of the existence of time-transcending ideas, which are always and unaltered available to the

⁵⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 105: “At once conserving and annulling inherited conceptual oppositions, this thought, like Saussure’s, stand on a borderline: sometimes within an un-criticized conceptually, sometimes putting a strain on the boundaries, and working toward deconstruction.”

⁵⁶ Cp. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 105.

subject of recognition. At the same time, however, he realizes that the occidental thinking is marked by structures which are not reflected upon by the same, but which are to the core characteristic of it. One of these suppressed structures is the opposition between primary language and secondary writing. It is in analogy to this opposition that the separation of culture and nature works, in which the natural state is a cultural fiction without any real existence. Derrida carves this out in the treatment of Rousseau, after having made clear by an intense lecture of a small chapter in *Tristes tropiques* by Lévi-Strauss that Derrida confronts himself with the risks of the term of writing. Lévi-Strauss assumes that writing is the origin of violence and is essentially made for the oppression and exploitation of man. When Derrida deals with this reproach he makes clear that he – contrary to the positions criticized by himself – does not suppress or exclude what first seems to contradict his own train of thoughts. So, after having advocated for a preference of writing over voice in the first part of *Grammatology*, Derrida begins the second part of his book by pointing out the risks of the conventionally secondary term of writing with Lévi-Strauss, which – according to Derrida – leads to the necessity of the development of a new writing-term, which does not pass on the meta-physical hierarchy of the spoken word over the merely representing writing of the same. A real science of writing has to be aware of the fact, that this science itself – by an act of newly arranged hierarchy – is not simply the solution to all problems, but that it bears risks if applied too superficially. These risks have to be discovered and made transparent to avoid their making mischief in the mode of suppressed things in the underground.

Lévi-Strauss reflects about the system of exploitation of writing, because the chief of his Nambikwara-tribe behaved in an important scene as if he was as knowledgeable in writing as the ethnographer often to be seen with his notebooks. Lévi-Strauss interprets this scene by means of Marxist theory⁵⁷ as “man’s exploitation by man”⁵⁸, while critically analyzing his own role as an ethnographer and arguing again in a naive way. The ethnographer feels guilty for having brought writing and, thus, “aggression coming from without”⁵⁹ and he dreams of the “purity of an innocent language”⁶⁰ of ‘animally satisfied’ primitive people up to his arrival.⁶¹ In a complicated lecture of *Tristes tropiques* and its predecessors Derrida states clearly, that though the Nambikwara have not been able to write in the traditional sense of the word, they have made distinctions which have to be interpreted in a mode of writing. It was, e.g. a tradition among them

⁵⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 119: “In *Tristes Tropiques*, Levi-Strauss is aware of proposing a Marxist theory of writing.”

⁵⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 121.

⁵⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 119.

⁶⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 120. *Ibid.*, 134: “Two motifs in the concluding lines: on the one hand, as with Rousseau, the theme of a necessary or rather fatal degradation, as the very form of progress; on the other hand, nostalgia for what preceded this degradation, an affective impulse towards the islets of resistance, the small communities that have provisionally protected themselves from corruption.”

⁶¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 117. *Cp. ibid.*, 112: “An accident occurring, in his view, upon a terrain of innocence, in a ‘state of culture’ whose natural goodness had not yet been degraded.”

to not pronounce names. Since a young girl wanted to take revenge on a playmate, the ethnographer still learnt of a name for the first time and from this time on it was – according to his own account (despite pricks of conscience)⁶² – very easy to play the children off against each other and to find out about their actually secret names. Derrida interprets the possibility of giving out or keeping silent about names as an analogon of writing,⁶³ because writing is violent in that way that it makes it impossible to differentiate between naming and calling due to its lack of context.⁶⁴

“This last violence is all the more complex in its structure because it refers at the same time to the two inferior levels of arche-violence and of law. In effect, it reveals the first nomination which was already an expropriation, but it denudes also that which since then functioned as the proper, the so-called proper, substitute of the deferred proper, *perceived by the social and moral consciousness* as the proper, the reassuring seal of self-identity, the secret.”⁶⁵

From these thought it becomes evident that Derrida demonstrates to Lévi-Strauss with the latter’s own ethnographical material, that the Nambikwara were no non-violent primitive people which have later been culturally alienated by writing introduced by the ethnographer and have consequently become violent. Hence, Derrida explains the inconsistency of Lévi-Strauss’ argumentation and rejects both, his differentiation between culture and nature and their Marxist interpretation. For himself Derrida concludes from his treatment of Lévi-Strauss, that even the pre-ethical sphere of the arche-writing is violent, since already here there shows a difference which later affects ethics itself. However, ethics can only be fully justified if one stays aware of the pre-ethical violence and does not suppress it, because otherwise every mode of justification would be based on opaque axioms.

“In other words, if writing is to be related to violence, writing appears well before writing in the narrow sense; already in the difference or the arche-writing that opens speech itself.”⁶⁶

By means of these reflections, Derrida saves his new science of writing, which opposes phono- and logocentrism from the same naivety that he reproaches Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau for with regard to their concept of nature and violence.

4. Prospect

In a very impressive way Derrida describes a pre-ethical sphere in 1967, from which ethics itself has to be designed. With it, even the pre-ethical sphere is characterized by differences which are violent and which – if suppressed – can evolve to physi-

⁶² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 113: “It is the anthropologist who violates a virginal space”.

⁶³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 108: “From the moment that the proper name is erased in a system, there is writing”.

⁶⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 110f.

⁶⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 112.

⁶⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 128.

cal violence. At the close of the depiction of Derrida's position, three further ideas are to show to what extent those considerations can be productive to think ahead.

1. Man cannot steal away from his responsibility: He has to take over responsibility and he cannot hold anyone else accountable for rules and laws. In that sense, one also has to relativize laws recognized in religions. Furthermore, these laws have to be examined regarding their universal validity: Do they have to or can they be valid for all man?

2. If ethics is the interpretation with sole responsibility of that which lies before man in the mode of difference and which remains hidden, then human rights are contingent in their concrete wording, but not disputable in their general justifiability. Thus, there is – according to Derrida – no time-transcendent nature of man, but every single man is so much a unique individual that he has the right to live – maybe even the duty. Ethics, therefore, is the necessary reaction of man to his precarious existence, in which he has to act and to behave towards himself. Consequently, there is a possibility to negotiate about the specific rights in discourse without the possibility of doing away with discourse itself. If, however, there is no alternative to discourse, then there exists a not inconsiderable guideline with regards to the content of human rights, since these must not stand against the enabling of discourse, but, what is more, have to enable all man to potentially participate in that discourse.

3. The differentiation between pre-ethical violence and the absolute Other, that is the absolute Transcendent, who is addressed as God in biblical tradition, this differentiation could be helpful to purify the experience of God. In a first reflex, believers attribute to God to both hurt and heal (cp. Hos 6,1). At this point of paradox-precarious experience of God it might be necessary to differentiate between pre-ethical conditions of existence of human life and the otherworldly God. Human life is – especially with its confinement to death – characterized by an obvious ambiguity, which in Christian-biblical hope, firstly, is embraced by the benevolent goodness of the Creator (Gen 1), secondly, has a guideline for contemporary daily life in Gods commandments (Deut 4) and, thirdly, does not recognize death as the end of God's love to his creatures (1Cor 15).

