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Violence, Religion, Metaphysics

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The thought of Hent de Vries is traversed in its entirety by the question of violence. In the patient and disquieting formulations that are proposed in the trilogy comprising *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, *Religion and Violence,* and *Minimal Theologies*, the dialogue with Jacques Derrida occupies a privileged position. The question of violence is articulated in the first place for de Vries and Derrida in terms of foundation, or more precisely what Derrida calls the "paradox" of foundation, namely, the fact that "the foundation of law – law of the law, institution of the institution, origin of the constitution – is a 'performative' event that cannot belong to the set that it founds, inaugurates, or justifies."[1] This is what Derrida names, in a double echo of Montaigne and Pascal, "the mystical foundation of authority."[2] De Vries in turn probes and deploys this motif, notably by demonstrating its relationship with Kierkegaard's *horror religiosus*, Adorno's horror (*Grauen*), and even Levinas's "il y a."[3] Derridean deconstruction operates as the matrix which, over the long term and for multiple traditions, allows the interrogation and manifestation of this "'outside' and 'exteriority' – or, what comes down to the same, [this] deep-down 'Inside' and 'interiority' – that is [this] nondiscursive element or ferment that surrounds and pervades, enables and threatens the life of words and concepts, arguments and style" (*Minimal Theologies*, 545).

While exploring this intimate other of reason, this collapsed foundation whose exposition is the best way to take apart its potentially catastrophic effects, de Vries accompanies Derrida's reflection on the violence within the metaphysical tradition. The key text here is the critical commentary that Derrida consecrates to Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics," a hermeneutic gesture which de Vries extends in *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* and *Religion and Violence*, and whose importance is even more essential in his own progression because Levinas was his first "hero."[4] As Derrida formulates it, Levinas' project consists in restoring metaphysics "in opposition to the entire tradition derived from Aristotle," and by connecting it to ethics, that is, to the "nonviolent relationship to the

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[1] Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," *Acts of Religion*, 57.
[2] *Ibid*. Cf. also "Force of Law,"*Ibid.,* 230.
[3] Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence*, chap. II; *Minimal Theologies*, 556.
[4] *Religion et violence*, Preface to the French edition, 32.

infinite as infinitely other, to the Other" ("Violence and Metaphysics," 102). This identification of metaphysics with ethics goes together with its identification with religion, insofar as the ethical and the religious relation are identically relation to transcendence. Identified as such, metaphysics, ethics, and religion are together in opposition to ontology, understood as egology and tautology, the primacy of the same, and the self, over the other. To characterize ontology in this way designates it as an intrinsically violent philosophy since, according to the extensive definition that Levinas offers, violence is precisely subsuming the other under the same.[5]

Derrida's critical strategy consists in reinscribing violence in an economy. The first moment of "Violence and Metaphysics" already mobilizes, regarding and in defense of Husserl, the notion of "transcendental violence," that is, the idea that the relation to the other is relation to another transcendental ego who constitutes the world in the same way as myself rather than being constituted by it, "the irreducible violence of the relation to the other" being, writes Derrida, "at the same time nonviolence, since it opens the relation to the other" (128–129). In the second moment, entitled "Of Ontological Violence," Derrida likewise objects to Levinas, this time in defense of Heideggerian ontology, that the thinking of being is the condition for ethics, and not its denial. "Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power," writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (46). But Derrida responds that the thinking of being, insofar as it is not intra-ontic, not a "first philosophy concerned with the archi-existent, […] is neither concerned with, nor exercises, any power. For power is a relationship between existents ("Violence and Metaphysics," 171). The comprehension of being rather conditions that of alterity, such that one must say that "ethico-metaphysical transcendence […] presupposes ontological transcendence" (*Ibid*, 177). While the thinking of being is, for this reason, "as close as possible to nonviolence," it cannot be said to be pure nonviolence. Because, writes Derrida, "like pure violence, pure nonviolence is a contradictory concept" (*Ibid*, 183). Once again, violence must be inscribed in an economy and conceived of as indistinguishable from the regimes of revealing, history, and meaning.

We have taken this brief detour through a seminal text for Hent de Vries because we wish to propose a series of interventions intended to reinscribe in a history this triplicity of terms which is also central for his thought: violence, religion, and metaphysics. "In a history," this means in an economy of ruptures and decisions, which is susceptible as such to reveal distinct metaphysical moments, rather than a linear and destinal movement of metaphysics. In this way, "the paradox of foundation" is clearly inscribed in the Christian theology of omnipotence, and more specifically, in the medieval distinction between absolute power and ordained power. Yet, this theological moment goes hand in hand with an

[5] On the extensive character of Levinas' definition of violence, see: Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence*, 124.

ontology which is historically identifiable as well, and which asserts the identity of being and power. In other words, the founding possibility [*possibilité principielle*] of violence *is not inscribed in ontology as such, but in a determined ontology*. It is not certain that the Platonic moment of the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας (*beyond being*) – which, we will see, is invoked by Derrida as well as Levinas and Heidegger – offers an exit from this ontology: for while this formula opens the way for an overcoming of ontology as well as negative theologies, it secondarizes being only at the price of an elevation of power. The traditional opposition of ontology and henology must therefore be called into question because both are ultimately thoughts of power or "dynamo-logies." But for this opposition, we can substitute another which operates between the thinkings of being (and/or the principle) *with* power, and the thinking(s) of being (and/or the principle) *without* power. As paradoxical as it might seem, such an alternative to dynamology is found at the source of the tradition against which Levinas proposes to restore the concept of metaphysics: that is to say, in Aristotle's ontology, which, by dissociating being and the god of power, also escapes the fate of violence.

The Theology of Omnipotence and the Question of Foundation

In "Force of Law," echoing Montaigne and Pascal, Derrida names "the mystical foundation of authority" the fact that "the very emergence of justice and law, the instituting, founding, and justifying moment of law implies a performative force, that is to say always an interpretative force and a call to faith [*un appel à la croyance*]" (241). This reflection on foundation is connected to a reading of Benjamin's *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* and the distinction that it formulates between the founding violence of law and the preserving violence of law. It is the founding act of law [*droit*], of all justice and law [*loi*], which Derrida designates as structurally violent, or even as a "*coup de force*": "the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law, to *making law*, would consist of a coup de force, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no earlier and previously founding law, no preexisting foundation, could, by definition, guarantee or contradict or invalidate" (*Ibid*).

The motif of the "coup de force," or even of the inaugural "perverformative," is developed in numerous ways by Hent de Vries. This is notably the case for the chapter in *Religion and Violence*[6] entitled (in reference to Michel de Certeau's characterization of the mystic) "Anti-Babel," which confers it a remarkable extension by connecting it to the concept of *Setzung*, understood both as the act of positing and in its relation to what is posited, to the "positive" in the sense of "positive law" or

[6] See also: *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, 156.

"positive theology." From there, it is a question not only of reinscribing *Setzung* in the theologico-political "repertoire," but also of formulating what appears as a guiding thesis for *Religion and Violence* as well as the two other volumes in the trilogy: the fact that "the turn to religion discernible in modern and contemporary philosophy goes hand in hand with a reassessment of the ethical and the political," while remaining indissociable from "a concern with the possibility, the reality, or the risk and threat of 'the worst.' Hence, the preoccupation with violence: empirical and transcendental, human or divine" ("Religion and Violence", 212–213).

The theologico-political reinscription of *Setzung* in *Religion and Violence* passes through a reading of Carl Schmitt, and his definition of sovereignty as the decision of the state of exception. This latter definition manifests the constitutive paradox of authority as a principle of the law that is outside the law (but not illegal).[7] Schmitt mobilizes two theological concepts here, the omnipotent God and the miracle:

> All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. (Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36)

The concept of the omnipotent God is offered by Schmitt as the example of the "transfer" of the theological to the political; and the concept of the miracle, as one of the terms in an analogy which correlates the exceptional situation/jurisprudence and miracle/theology. Of these two theologoumena, it is first and foremost the miracle which captivates de Vries, up to his most recent developments.[8] Schmitt's reference to the miracle as a figure of the exception, as a rupture of the law due to a direct intervention of the first cause, would allow us to apprehend the "structural similarity" between the political and the theological, insofar as their foundation is based on a "disruptive moment" (*Religion and Violence*, 221). Alongside this theological motif, de Vries also summons the distinction between creation *ex nihilo* and continuous creation, which is for him equally revelatory of the "paradoxical, indeed aporetic, structure" of the theologico-political insofar as the latter must pose "the continuation and sustained renewal of the order" founded by disruption (*Ibid*).

[7] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 12–13, 23.
[8] See: *Le Miracle au cœur de l'ordinaire*.

For my part, I would like to call attention to the other theological concept mobilized by Carl Schmitt (and associated, in the first *Political Theology*, with the strong thesis of the transfer of the theological to the political, and not with the weaker thesis of a simple structural analogy): the concept of the "omnipotent God" and, more specifically, the distinction between absolute power and ordained power, which comes to modalize it beginning in the 13th century. Besides being more originary than the concepts of the miracle or creation *ex nihilo* and continuous creation (the concept of omnipotence grounds creation *ex nihilo*, like the concept of absolute power grounds miracle), these theologoumena might allow us to even more closely apprehend what Hent de Vries calls the "paradoxical structure" of the theologico-political.

In its "standard usage,"[9] the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* comes as a response to a double constraint: how can we conceive of both the freedom of God and the order of the world? Absolute power is omnipotence without the other divine attributes (wisdom, goodness, justice) and, as such, liberated from all law, logical, ethical, or physical. Considered *de potentia absoluta*, God can make A and not-A true at the same time, damn an innocent person, or modify the order that he himself instituted. It is in this sense that absolute power is posited as the principle of the miracle. An unbounded modality of power, *potentia absoluta* thereby installs as the origin a pure freedom, a God who is outside the law. *Potentia ordinata*, for its part, is the power considered with – and limited by – other divine attributes, particularly justice. The distinction between absolute power and ordained power was quickly understood to oppose *de potentia* with *de iustitia* and, as such, it was rejected by theologians who refused to admit that, in God, power can be separated from justice.[10] Ordained power thereby comes to designate divine power as normed by laws and principles and connected to the order – particularly the natural order – which they determine.

The medieval distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinate* can thus be formulated in Benjaminian terms as a distinction between the "founding" power of the law and the "preserving" power of law. Moreover, it makes visible the threshold between those powers, that is, the very moment of foundation as a free decision made by the absolute power which is exempted from the law and order, of the law and order which the ordained power will henceforth preserve. It therefore seems that, even more than that of miracle, it is the concept of omnipotence modalized in this way which allows us to conceive of the paradox of foundation: if the miracle refers to the rupture of order, absolute power designates its inauguration as the "coup de force," "neither just nor unjust," to use

[9] The formulation is from Eugenio Randi, *Il Sovrano e l'orologiaio*, chap. II.

[10] The opposition of *de potenti*a and *de iustitia* is already found in Origen, *In Matt*., 213, 17–22. On the opposition of power/justice as the matrix of the distinction between absolute power and ordered power, see: Boulnois, 86, n.32. The rejection of the distinction between *potentia absoluta/ordinata* is notably found in Bonaventure, in the name of the idea that a power that acts in a disordered manner (*inordinate)* would in fact be powerless: cf. *Sent*. I, d. 43, dub. 7.

Derrida's terms, which presides over law without being submitted to it. Absolute power thereby appears as the principle of law that is *outside the law* – a principle that is outside the law but not illegal, since there is no law that preexists it which it could break, or according to which it could be judged.

This point is made explicitly in the formulation that Duns Scotus proposes for the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata.* This distinction is connected, according to modalities that we cannot further develop here,[11] to a concept of contingency that is both radical and novel, which is based on a thinking of founding arbitrariness (the free choice made by divine will between two possibilities has no rationale except that will is will, *nisi quia voluntas est voluntas*).[12] The Scotist interpretation of the distinction is remarkable in that it transfers it from the theological to the juridical field (from which it originally issues),[13] applying not only to God but to "everything that acts with an intellect and a will": through the distinction, Duns Scotus thus contrasts, for all rational and free agents, two ways of relating to the law. The agent who conforms to "valid law" acts according to ordained power; the agent whose action is "beyond or against the law" (*praeter legem vel contra eam*) acts according to absolute power.[14] However, within this first opposition, there operates another which refers to the agent's power (*potestas)*: the meaning of the distinction varies depending on whether the relationship between the subject and the law is one of sovereignty or submission. For whomever has the power to proclaim law, absolute power is not disordained power, but the power of a new order. It is no longer the power to act against or beyond the law, but the power to act according to another law.

The Scotist interpretation of the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* thereby exhibits with particular clarity the constitutive paradox of foundation, as both founder of and exempt from the law, but also its definitional connection to sovereign power, both in its theological and political meaning.

… presbeiai kai dunamei

The theological moment that we have just described conveys a founding thought of violence, understood in its Derridean sense as a "coup de force." However, it can be associated not only with the violence of foundation, but also with violence understood in the larger sense defined by Levinas,

[11] For a detailed analysis, see: Aubry, *Genèse du Dieu souverain*. On the distinction between *potentia absoluta/potentia ordinata*: chap. III; on Duns Scotus: chap. V.
[12] Duns Scotus, *Ord.* I, dist. 8, p. 2; q. un., §299.
[13] The distinction has its source in the *mortis causa* contract, where the term *absolutus* refers to the absence of a will, the term *ordinatus* refers to the declaration of the last will. See, on this point, Randi, "Potentia del conditionata ."
[14] Duns Scotus, *Ord.* I, dist. 44, qu. un., §3.

as excluding and exclusive action: "Violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act; as if the rest of the universe were there only to receive the action."[15]

Indeed, the theology of omnipotence also conveys a thinking of the first cause as both exclusive and immediate, that is, capable of acting without the mediation of secondary causes (the miracle being exemplary of this capacity, insofar as it is a direct effect of the first cause). Once more, this characterization of omnipotence is explicitly formulated by Duns Scotus, who contrasts the veritable – that is, theological – concept of omnipotence with the inadequate concept – designated as "philosophical" – of "infinite power," by defining omnipotence precisely as a power of immediate action, or action un-mediated by secondary causes.[16]

Yet, and this is what I would now like to underline, the theology of omnipotence is indissociable from a determined ontology, that is, an ontology of power or *dynamology*: this ontology identifies power with being (primarily with the first being), while redefining the very concept of power depending on whether it is applied to God or creatures. I cannot describe here in detail, as I have elsewhere,[17] these different operations which span a long period of time and include different variations: let us just say that Thomas Aquinas' gesture is decisive here. Aquinas asserts that there exists in all things a power of being (*potestas* or *virtus essendi*) which is arranged according to different degrees. In God, that is to say the first being, this power is total: "God, […] Who is His being, as we have proved above, has being according to the whole power of being itself" (*Contra Gentiles* I, 28, 2). It is this plenitude in God of the power of being which Aquinas designates by the syntagma *actus purus essendi.* This knotting in God of power and being ("*Deus est sua virtus*," *De Potentia*, q.3, a.7, resp.) involves a new thinking of being as well as a redefinition of power, which must be thought of as active in itself, such that its action requires neither passive power nor potentiality in order to operate: Aquinas thereby establishes a rigorous connection between omnipotence and creation *ex nihilo* (*Summa Theologica* Ia, q. 45, a1, sol. 3). But, in addition to divine power, the power of creatures must also be redefined: in response, the Thomistic concept of *aptitudo*, itself inherited from the Neoplatonic concept of *epitēdeiotēs*, identifies a power that is not only passive but also purely receptive – nothing more than the ability to receive the divine gift of *esse.*[18]

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[15] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 6. Hent de Vries cites and comments this passage in *Religion and Violence*, 125.

[16] *Ord. I*, dist. 42, q. un.

[17] On the correlative construction of the ontology of power and the theology of omnipotence, cf. Aubry, *Genèse du Dieu souverain, passim.* On Thomas Aquinas, chap. IV.

[18] On the concept of *epitēdeiotēs*, see, Aubry, "Capacité et convenance. La notion d'*epitēdeiotēs* dans la théorie porphyrienne de l'embryon," and "La doctrine aristotélicienne de l'embryon et sa réinterprétation par Porphyre." On its role in the Thomasian doctrine of analogy, see: *Genèse du Dieu souverain*, 202–212.

Therefore, like the violence of foundation, the violence defined by Levinas as exclusionary and exclusive action, such that "one acts as if one were alone to act: as if the rest of the universe were there only to *receive* the action" (Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 6), is also historically inscribed in the theology of omnipotence, as well as in the ontology – the dynamology – from which the latter is indissociable.[19]

Must we therefore say, along with Levinas (who, as de Vries notes, seems blind to the violence intrinsic to the religious[20]), that every ontology is an ontology of power? In this respect, would there be, much like a structural violence of foundation, a violence internal to the metaphysical tradition in its entirety? Or can we isolate within it *a* metaphysics, a singular moment, which offers an alternative or an escape from this fate?

We know that, for Derrida as well as for Levinas, such a moment is indicated by the Platonic formula in Book VI of the *Republic,* ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας. In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida commentator of Levinas speaks of the "sun of the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας" as being for Levinas "the instrument of destruction for the phenomenology and ontology subjected to the neutral totality of the Same as Being or as Ego" (105). The Platonic formula becomes that of ethical "excendence," understood as the "departure from being and from the categories which describe it," thus suggesting the possibility of a metaphysics which is non-(or meta-) ontological. Derrida cites the ending of *Totality and Infinity*: "We thus encounter in our own way the Platonic idea of the Good beyond Being"; and he offers a commentary on "in our own way": "which is to say that ethical ex-cendence is not projected toward the neutrality of the good, but toward the other, and that which (is) ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας is not essentially light but fecundity or generosity" ("Violence and Metaphysics", 106).

A bit further in "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida will nonetheless contrast Levinas with Heidegger's use of ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας[21] to show that this formula, far from being an overcoming of ontology, can be understood as the formula of Heideggerian ontology itself. The ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας must therefore be understood as indicating not the excess over Being, but the excess of Being itself over beings – that is, ontological transcendence. From this, Derrida concludes that "the thought of Being could not possibly occur as ethical violence" (177). And he goes on turning Levinas' own arguments against him by showing that, insofar as ethical transcendence remains intra-ontic and is

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[19] Let us note, however, that this primary ontological structure which, in Aquinas, divides power between the omnipotence of the divine and the receptive power of creatures is doubled by a secondary structure which reintegrates an order of secondary causes of nature. On this "contest" of powers, defended by Aquinas notably against the doctrine of *kâlam* and the school of the Ash'arites, see: *Genèse du Dieu souverain*, 212–222. On the attempt by Duns Scotus to overcome the opposition of nature and violence through the notion of *potentia nuda*, see: Aubry, "Miracle, Mystery and Authority …."

[20] *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, 5.

[21] Derrida refers to *Vom Wesen des Grundes* and *Introduction to Metaphysics*, see respectively, "Violence and Metaphysics," 182n84, 100n3.

identified with metaphysics, Levinas ultimately confirms Heidegger by returning to metaphysics as the forgetting of Being and the occultation of the ontico-ontological difference.

An instrument of the Heideggerian overcoming of metaphysics as well as of the Levinasian overcoming of ontology, the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας is also invoked by Derrida by its proper name. This is notably the case in another text that we have cited, which also has numerous echoes in Hent de Vries' work: "Faith and Knowledge."[22] Here, the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας is associated with another Platonic term, this time issuing from the *Timaeus: khôra.* These two terms designate the possibility of an overcoming, no longer of metaphysics or ontology, but of religion in its positive, historical forms, as well as theology, an overcoming which would be a return to the condition of the connection, of *religare*, which Derrida also calls "the *messianic*, or messianicity without messianism" ("Faith and Knowledge," *Acts of Religion*, 56). Yet, this "messianicity, stripped of everything," is specifically called by the paradox of foundation. It appears, Derrida writes in terms we cited earlier, "wherever […] a purely rational analysis brings the following paradox to light: that the foundation of law – law of the law, institution of the institution, origin of the constitution – is a 'performative' event that cannot belong to the set that it founds, inaugurates or justifies. Such an event […] is the decision of the other in the undecidable." The question is thus to find the trace of this foundation and "atheologize" it, in order to liberate "a universal rationality and the political democracy that cannot be dissociated from it" (*Ibid.*, 56–57).

Thus, the different uses which Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida propose for the Platonic formula of the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας make it appear as the very code of overcoming, the key for all escape – beyond metaphysics, beyond ontology, beyond religion, as well as beyond the very opposition of religion and reason – insofar as it is associated, successively, with ontological transcendence, with ethical excendence, or with the paradox of foundation.

Yet, a remarkable point must here be highlighted: in all of these usages, the Platonic formula is *always abridged.*[23] The text of Book VI of *The Republic* in fact designates the Good not only as ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας but as ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβείᾳ καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος, that is, "[…] far surpassing being *in rank and power*" (509b 9-10, my emphasis). Its transcendence is qualified: the Good is not only posed as beyond being, but also as beyond being *by* rank and by power (the Greek *kai* can also be understood as epexegetical, signifying "in rank *which means* in power"). In other words, the Platonic formula indeed poses an excess over being, but it is an excess *of and by power*. If

[22] See for instance *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, chap. II.

[23] Heidegger, in the passage from *Vom Wesen des Grundes* quoted by Derrida, does justice to the totality of the formula, but at the expense of a surprising substitution since he replaces the term "*dunamis*" with "*hexis*," before interpreting *hexis* as "potentiality," and then as "possible": 182n84, "Violence and Metaphysics."

the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας can be understood as an escape beyond ontology,[24] it is not beyond dynamology. On the contrary, the secondarization of being accompanies the elevation of power [*l'exhaussement de la puissance*].

This is how the formulation in *Republic* VI is interpreted and systematized in Neoplatonism. Plotinus' first principle, the One-Good, is beyond being (the Intellect, both the first *ousia* and the first *energeia*), but it is also qualified as δύναμις πάντων, that is, "the power of all things." *Dunamis pantōn* resists "the negative path," that is, the different procedures of hyperbole and apheresis, of excess and negation, which govern Plotinus' discourse on the One-Good. Furthermore, the concept of *dunamis pantōn* comes as a response to the dilemma of the principle, that is, the necessity to think of the principle at once as radically transcending its effects (this notably to counter the Aristotelian "third man" argument and to block an infinite regression), and as connected to its effects.[25] In the first principle, the power of all things is the very moment of its causality, which is precisely the moment of the fecundity and generosity (*aphtonia*) highlighted by Levinas and Derrida.[26]

This causal model is quite different from the one governed by the Christian concept of omnipotence. First, because the power of all things remains subordinate to the Good, whereas, as we've seen, omnipotence can be posed as anterior to laws and values; next, because the power of all things is not connected to freedom, but rather posed as necessarily proceeding from the perfection of the principle, and presiding over a necessary production.

The power of all things and omnipotence thereby determine distinct, even conflicting, metaphysical moments (Abelard was condemned in 1140 by the Council of Sens for defending a necessitarian model derived from the Neoplatonist *aphtonia*; and the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* is, in particular, intended to protect, against Abelard, divine freedom and the contingency of the order it founds). Beyond the differences we've highlighted, the position of the principle as power is nevertheless a common point between Plotinus' moment and the Christian moment: the concept of power of all things is a response to the dilemma of the principle, the concept of omnipotence manifests the paradox of foundation.

The permanence of power across distinct metaphysical moments – one of which, henology, is frequently invoked as an alternative to the other, onto-theology – must therefore lead to questioning

[24] This point is discussed by certain Plato commentators who consider that the parallel between the Good and the sun must be interpreted as signifying that, just as the sun is the cause of generation even while belonging to the domain of generation, the Good is the cause of being even while belonging to the domain of being: cf. Baltes.

[25] On Plotinus' concept of the "power of all things," see: Aubry, *Dieu sans la puissance*, chap. VI.

[26] Cf. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 106.

historical sequencings as well as commonly accepted structural oppositions: *henology and onto-theology are both dynamologies.*

But we must henceforth return to the question presiding over this opposition: if the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας is not its formula, is there – and where to find – a metaphysical moment which escapes the fate of power?

Being – and God – Without Power

As paradoxical as it might seem, such a moment can be identified at the source of the metaphysical tradition, that is to say, in the very philosophy against which Levinas proposes to restore its concept: that is, in Aristotle's metaphysics. The latter indeed proposes an ontology which manages to think of being as well as the divine without power.

In Book A of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle emphasizes that his project involves both considering the good as the first principle, and identifying its proper mode of causality. He thus claims this gesture, whose paternity is ordinarily attributed to Plato and, precisely, to the position in *Republic* VI of the Idea of the Good as ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας. But, according to Aristotle, Plato failed to isolate the causality proper to the good by falsely associating it with formal causality.[27] Aristotle, for his part, will at once posit the good as principle, and designate its causality as being that of the act (*energeia*) and of the end (*telos*), and as being, as such, exempt from power, from the *dunamis* which Plato associates with the Idea of the Good.

The instrument of this gesture – which consists in dissociating principle and power –lies in the invention of a conceptual couple given in *Metaphysics* E 2, 1026a 33-b1 as one of the principal meanings of being: in-potency [*l'en-puissance*] and in-act *[l'en-acte]* (δυνάμει/ἐνεργείᾳ). Whereas the classical meaning of the term *dunamis* as power has numerous uses before Aristotle, the concept of *in-potency* (which is specifically marked in Greek by the dative form, *dunamei*) is an Aristotelian invention, like the concept of *energeia.* The singularity of this conceptual couple often goes overlooked, due to its reduction either to the Platonic couple of matter and form, or to that of power and action. But – and this is an essential point – *in-potency is not power, and act is not action*. These two concepts are gradually elaborated over the course of the central books of the *Metaphysics* (ZHΘ), where they will supersede the concepts of matter and form, and those of passive power and active power. This work of substitution accompanies a movement of subsumption of the causal schema of efficiency, which distributes action between a passive power and an active power, under that of finality,

[27] Cf. *Metaphysics* A 7, 988b 11–16. To this we add that according to Aristotle, it is the One, not the Good, which, for Plato, is the first principle: cf. *Eudemian Ethics*, I 8, 1218a 20–21.

which connects in-potency to in-act. In-potency is neither identifiable with active power nor passive power. Being in-potency is not being the possible subject of an action or a passion: the concept rather designates the very interaction of a passive power and an active power, as the principle of a change oriented by an end. In the same way, to be in-act is not to act, nor to be in movement, rather, for a determined being, it is to have attained the end which is also his good.

Yet, Aristotle's god, the prime unmoved mover, is designated as pure act, *ousia energeia* – and not, as is often said, as "pure form," a syntagma which is absent in Aristotle's texts. To describe it in this way suggests that it is always-already – that is, without prior movement – the end and the good. It also indicates that it is radically exempt from power as well as potentiality. The demonstration in *Metaphysics* Λ6 of the existence of a prime unmoved mover, the necessary condition for the eternity of movement, rests on this double negation: *ousia energeia*, the prime mover has no *dunamis*, and is not *dunamei*, it does not have power and it is not in-potency. Without power, it is nonetheless not powerless. It is endowed with an efficacy that we can call non-efficient; if it acts, it does so as the final cause, in a particular sense which Λ7 clarifies: the prime unmoved mover is not the immediate end of movement for other substances (which are composed of act and in-potency), but it is, as pure actuality, the condition for movement by which other substances realize their own end and good.

Hence, we understand that Λ5 can designate in-potency and act as "principles [which] are the same by analogy" (1071a 3–5). The analogy must be understood here in the geometrical sense of an equality of relations: the relation of *ousia energeia* to substances composed of act and in-potency is the same as the relation of act to in-potency inside those substances. Just as the movement of every composed substance – which has in-potency as its principle – tends toward the act which is its end and its good, the condition of movement as a whole is a pure act which is the always-already realized good. The conceptual couple of in-potency and act is therefore the basis for a unitary ontology, encompassing separated substance (god, or prime mover) as well as composed substances.

From this brief description, which I have developed in detail elsewhere,[28] we can draw several propositions related to the problem which concerns us here:

- First, the thesis I propose, which consists in a unitary reading of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* founded on the conceptual couple of in-potency and in-act, implies revising the interpretive translation, inaugurated by Suarez and extended by Natorp and Jaeger, according to which there is a contradiction, or at least a tension, between the ontological and theological determinations of "researched science." We know that Heidegger in turn inherits this interpretation. He

[28] See: Aubry, *Dieu sans la puissance*, first part.

transforms the Aristotelian problem (or supposed problem) of the scission of ontology and theology into a symptom, to denounce it: metaphysics, in its Aristotelian origin, poses the question of Being by means of an irreconcilable division of beings. From there, the onto-theological apparatus comes to obscure the ontological question of Being through a theological construction, that is, through a theory of the supreme being or the supremely ontic. Thus, Heidegger's characterization of the structure of metaphysics as onto-theology is a direct tributary of a split reading of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which, it seems, can be overcome by a unitary and ontological reading.

- In addition, the Heideggerian interpretation of the concepts of *dunamis* and *energeia* must also be interrogated. We know that in "Metaphysics as History of Being" Heidegger considers the translation of *energeia* as *actualitas* to be a privileged revealing of the history of Being: the effect of this translation-transition "from the Greek to the Roman conceptual language" (*The End of Philosophy*, 12) is, for Heidegger, that Being is no longer thought as "presence" but as the "product of an activity." But Heidegger's reading of *energeia* as presence conceals a fundamental trait of Aristotelian ontology: its axiological character. For Aristotle, *energeia* does not signify presence but real identity (in god) or realized identity (in composed substances) of being and the good. It is in an ethical context (fragment 14 of the *Protrepticus*) that Aristotle uses this concept for the first time in connection with *dunamis.*

Just like that of *energeia*, the Heideggerian reading of *dunamis* is curiously inflected: in the 1931 course on *Metaphysics* Θ 1-3, *On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, Heidegger reads *dunamis* as unequivocally signifying force (*Kraft*): Aristotle's analysis reveals "the essence of force," "being a force as such," as residing in the "relation of the ποιεῖν to the πάσχειν: *being a force is both as one—* ὡς μία" (89).

But this is not all: the Heideggerian reading of the transition from *energeia* to *actualitas* is in turn the subject of a critical reworking by Agamben. This reworking accompanies the elaboration in *Opus Dei* of an archeology of effectiveness and operativity, understood as the confusion – or resolution – of being in action. The decisive transition resides, for Agamben, in the translation of *energeia* not as *actualitas*, as Heidegger says, but even earlier, with the Latin Fathers, as *efficacia* and *efficiencia*. But at the same time, the Aristotelian distinction between *dunamis* and *energeia* is designated by Agamben as "the originary nucleus of the ontology of effectiveness" (58). This is why one of the central elements of Agamben's philosophical enterprise consists in deactivating the Aristotelian apparatus of *dunamis* and *energeia*, by bringing to light another apparatus in Aristotle: marginal and only sketched, this

apparatus does not connect power to action, but rather the "power not to" to *argia*[29]– the opposite of *energeia*, the fact of being not at work but without work, without proper, assignable function. It is this apparatus, which is originally but also marginally Aristotelian, which Agamben isolates and uses against the central apparatus of *dunamis* and *energeia*, in order to deactivate the ontological "double machine" of power and activity, but also the juridico-political apparatus that connects constituting power and constituted power, violence and law, anomy and nomos,[30] – and which also operates in the distinction between absolute power and ordained power.[31]Yet as we have seen – and this is where we wanted to arrive – Aristotle's central apparatus of in-potency and in-act already contains, *within itself*, an alternative model to the logic of force invoked by Heidegger in his reading of *Metaphysics* Θ as well as to the ontology of operativity which Agamben proposes to deactivate. Far from being the "originary nucleus" of the ontology of operativity, Aristotelian ontology instead proposes a completely different thinking of being, since, by considering it in terms of in-potency and in-act, it dissociates it from power as well as from action.

We must therefore recognize, at the very source of the metaphysical tradition, a coherent ontology which escapes the onto-theological scission, and which contradicts Levinas' affirmation that "every ontology is an ontology of power." The ontology of power has its origin in a metaphysical moment that is not originary but in fact, much later, that it to say in the medieval theology of omnipotence, where the possibility of violence is also foundationally inscribed. To the commonly invoked opposition between ontology and henology considered an alternative and an escape, we must henceforth substitute a different opposition: between the thought of being and/or the principle *without* power, and the thoughts of being and/or of the principle *with* power – that is, between Aristotle's ontology and "dynamology," in its different ontological and henological modalities. From here, we can reread the history of metaphysics differently, that is to say, recognize in it another economy, made of different ruptures and conflicts than those described by the traditional narratives – but also a veritable history, and not a *fatum* which, from its origin, would entirely and ineluctably condemn metaphysics to violence.

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[29] Agamben finds the Aristotelian sources for these respective concepts in *Metaphysics* Θ1, 1046a 30–31 and *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 1097b 28–30.

[30] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 264–265; *Homo Sacer I*, 63–67. On the relation between these different devices and notably between Aristotelian *dunamis*, absolute power, and constituent power, see: *The Use of Bodies*, 267, and *Homo Sacer* I, 42–49.

[31] On Agamben's reading of the distinction between *potentia absoluta/ordinata*, see also: *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, 106–108, where it corresponds to the distinction of formal sovereignty/execution.

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