‘As If’ There Were a ‘Jew’: The (non)Existence of Deconstructive Responsibility

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Abstract
The argument of this paper hinges on Derrida’s relation to Judaism as a religious heritage and/or as an essential experience. If he can be said to ‘appropriate his Jewish roots’ at all, as Colby Dickinson (2011) has recently proposed, this is not because Derrida concurs that all belief in an ultimate reality (‘as such’) must now be understood in merely conditional terms (‘as if’). Rather, it is because Derrida deconstructs the difference between the Jew and the non-Jew, along with the differences between the ‘as if’ and the ‘as such’ and the performative and the constative, in his very demonstration of the impossibility of ‘being-jewish’. Dickinson thus misunderstands the way in which Derrida appropriates Kant’s regulative ‘as if’, and thus misrepresents what is at stake in Derrida’s ‘faith’ in ‘Jewishness’. What is at stake is what Derrida calls deconstructive responsibility, and it takes the form of a radical fidelity to the principle of reason (to an ‘unconditional theoreticism’). This responsibility, paradoxically, demands and impels the interrogation of critical thinking itself, with its principles, its essences and its identities. Accordingly, Derrida interrupts both the ‘as such’ and the ‘as if’ with the ‘if’ of a dangerous ‘perhaps’.

In this paper, I develop a reading of the Derridean ‘as if’, and I contrast this reading to an argument recently proposed by Colby
Dickinson. Specifically, in his article, ‘The Logic of the “as if” and the (non)Existence of God: An Inquiry into the Nature of Belief in the Work of Jacques Derrida’, Dickinson (2011) points to a movement of difference between the Kantian ‘as if’ (the philosophical regulative Idea, to which Derrida’s readers sometimes reduce his ethical-political thinking), and the phenomenological ‘as such’ (which might lend itself as a religious ideal). Dickinson locates Derrida’s position as falling somewhere between these two poles, and he develops an approach to the problem of (religious) belief on this basis. As a consequence, however, Dickinson’s reading of ‘the nature of belief’ in Derrida’s work manifests to some extent both of the errors just identified, namely, that of reducing what Derrida means by ethical-political responsibility to a regulative Idea, on the one hand, and that of aggrandizing it into a religious experience on the other. In contrast, I argue that Derrida deconstructs the opposition between the performative ‘as if’ and the constative ‘as such’ and that, in so doing, he radically displaces it.

In what follows, I focus on what is at stake in our disagreement about the nature of Derridean belief. Most importantly, it cannot be said either that Derrida points toward ‘the suchness of things’ in concert with Giorgio Agamben, or that Derrida’s use of the ‘“as if” . . . essentially conform[s] to the Kantian . . . regulative [I]dea’ (Dickinson 2011, 106 nt.6; 94). For what emerges from Derrida’s displacement of the opposition, I show, is his endorsement of what one might call a quasi-conditional ‘if’ of deconstructive responsibility – or, as he puts it, ‘a dangerous modality of the “perhaps” that Nietzsche speaks of’ – an ‘if’ that disconcerts both ‘the “as” of the “as if”’ as well as the “as” of the “as such”’ (Derrida 2002, 234). It is precisely in order to account for this endorsement, this ‘profession’ of ‘faith’ (2002) that Derrida himself associates with an ‘ultimate unknown’ (1998, 29), that one must clarify the nature of Derrida’s ‘belief’ in the enigmatic ‘if’. His reflections on Judaism (as if there were a ‘Jew’) provide an excellent opportunity for this clarification, but they do not ultimately justify such faith.

I. The ‘if’ or the ‘as if’?

According to Dickinson, Derrida’s modification of the Kantian ‘as if’ (als ob) gives us a way to negotiate the ‘essential dilemma of faith’ that attends ‘our need for constructing images or representations’ (Dickinson 2011, 89, 87–8). Specifically, Dickinson argues, from Greek mythology as represented by Euripides, through to Pascal’s wager and Kant’s
regulative Idea, what emerges time and again is ‘the absolute necessity for “as if” statements’ and, consequently, the inescapable conditionality of any belief in God, or for that matter, of any belief at all (Ibid., 91, 92). This is the essential dilemma with which Dickinson is grappling. In Derrida, he contends, we can find a resource for dealing with this problem, insofar as Derrida’s work involves,

the attempt to unite the conditional nature of all experience (its essential, ‘as if’ quality) to the poetic gesture toward the present moment that is rooted deep within the Judaic (or Abrahamic) tradition, the ‘as suchness’ beyond the ‘as if’ and yet rooted in it in some sense. (Ibid., 104)

Essentially, Dickinson is proposing that Derrida’s appropriation of the Kantian ‘as if’ takes the form of a poetic gesture that allows us to ‘approximate’ the universality of things as such, as they ‘truly are’, beyond their ‘traditional representations’, and with reference to ‘the horizon of a future always yet to come’ (Ibid., 101; compare Derrida 1996, 215–16).

Now, it must be remarked from the outset1 that the path Dickinson follows from the ‘as if’ to a poetic gesticulation toward the present (the thing ‘as such’) hinges on a misunderstanding of a particularly ambiguous line in Derrida’s ‘Abraham, the Other’ (2007). In that essay, it will be recalled, Derrida introduces himself (somewhat ironically) as at once ‘the least Jewish, the most untrustworthy Jew . . . and, at the same time . . . he who plays at playing the role of the most Jewish of all . . . as if the least could do the most’ (Derrida 2007, 13). He then adds (parenthetically):

[Y]ou will have noted, no doubt, that I often have recourse to the ‘as if’, and I do so intentionally, without playing, without being facile, because I believe that a certain perhaps of the as if, the poetical or the literary, in sum, lies at the heart of what I want to entrust to you. (Ibid., 13)

Here is Dickinson’s gloss:

As this passage illuminates quite clearly, it is the aporia/antinomy of experience itself, that is, of those laws which structure it which Kant had tried to make peace with by first suggesting the absolutely essential nature of the ‘as if’, that Derrida finds emblematically demonstrated within the historical ‘heritage’ of religious experience, even, and especially, his own religious experience as a J/jew. Yet, it seemingly is also an ‘as if’ which goes beyond the religious representations that litter our world. There is a core beyond it that comes from within it, a ‘perhaps of the as if’ that opens him up to ‘the poetical or the literary, in sum [what] lies at the heart of what I want to entrust to you’. (Dickinson 2011, 97–8)
Between the philosophical and the phenomenological, it would seem, poetry intimates a ‘conditional core of human experience’ in which we can have faith (Ibid., 101). Yet what Dickinson misses is that the force of ‘a certain perhaps’ that belongs to the ‘as if’ also belongs, by extension, to ‘the poetical or the literary’ as well. It is this ‘if’ (this other Abraham, perhaps), not the poetical or the literary ‘as if’, that Derrida would ‘entrust’ (or ‘confide’) to us.

For we should recall, first, that Derrida consistently associates the ‘as if’ in its customary sense with the ‘simulacrum’, ‘the fable’, ‘fabulation’, or ‘fiction’ (Derrida 2002, 208; 213; 215). In her introduction to Without Alibi, for example, Peggy Kamuf identifies the ‘as if’ as the ‘supplement of fiction’ (Kamuf 2002, 10), and Derrida similarly writes that the ‘poem, novel, oeuvre d’art in general, but also everything that ... does not belong to the realist and constative description of what is, but produces the event’ belongs to ‘the qualified “as if” of a supposedly established convention’, and precisely not to the ‘as such’ of what is ostensibly present (Derrida 2002, 218). And we should also recall, secondly, that Derrida will go on in ‘The University Without Condition’ to link the if of this ‘perhaps’ to ‘the thinking of an event, that is, to the thinking of this thing that perhaps happens’, that would ‘interrupt the order of the “as if”’, and whose ‘“place” must be real, effective, concrete enough to belie the whole logic of the “as if”’ (Ibid., 213). Indeed (this is the central thrust of argument in ‘The University without Condition’), Derrida proposes to undertake what he calls ‘a leap that would carry us beyond the power of the performative “as if,” beyond even the distinction between constative and performative upon which we have until now pretended to rely’ (Ibid., 230, emphases mine). What is at stake in this leap is the ‘force in keeping with an experience of the perhaps’, which is to say, a force that is in keeping with ‘the “if” of the “as if”’ rather than with its ‘as’ (Ibid., 235, emphases added).

It is, as he says, ‘a subtle displacement but one whose consequences seem ... limitless’, for it is an unconditional ‘force of resistance—and of dissidence’ (Ibid., 213, 207). To follow Derrida in this direction is to carve out a very different path with regard to the nature of belief evinced in his texts.

II. The faith of being-jewish

To be sure, Derrida expresses the call for this leap in terms of a profession of ‘faith’, specifically, a faith in ‘the university without condition’, in the future of the ‘humanities to come’ and, more generally,
in ‘a certain unconditional independence of thought, of deconstruction, of justice’ (Ibid., 235). Moreover, this call would seem to implicate (religious) ‘belief’ insofar as it can be tied to what he means by ‘being-jewish’. Yet all of this requires careful treatment. In particular, what does Derrida mean when he says the presentation of his belief in the university and in ‘the Humanities of tomorrow’ would be ‘like a profession of faith’ (Ibid., 202)? Moreover, how does this quasi-faith in the university relate to what he calls his ‘Jewish’ heritage, his ‘being-jewish’?

To begin with the second question, it is significant that Derrida’s reflections on Judaism, on ‘being-jew’, on ‘jewishness’ (lower case) in general, and on his own relation to these nominations reveal repeatedly that for him what qualifies ‘jewishness/Judaism’ in its singularity, if anything could be said to do so at all, is the impossibility of identifying anything resembling the ‘Jew’ as such. He writes, for example, ‘but what is a self-proclaimed Jew? Here, finally, is perhaps my only question’ (Derrida 2007, 22; translation modified, original emphasis). It is his ‘only question’ because the ‘hyper-exemplarity’ of ‘being-jewish’ – if ‘being-jewish’ is not simply ‘a case, an example among others of an originary contamination of the authentic by the inauthentic’, which it might well be – this hyper-exemplarity ‘would threaten … its alleged exemplarity itself, its universal responsibility incarnated in the singularity of one alone or of one people, and with this, everything that may reassure itself in the sense of the word jew’ (Ibid., 29).

So ‘jewishness’ is either one example among others of the general impossibility of distinguishing between the authentic and the inauthentic (between the ‘as such’ and the mere simulacrum, the ‘as if’) – an impossibility that Derrida exposes in his reading of Sartre’s Reflections on the Jewish Question⁴ (even ‘Sartre himself cannot believe in it’, Derrida remarks (Ibid., 24) – in which case it is as impossible to say what it is to be Jewish (as such) as it is to be anything else. Or ‘jewishness’ is ‘perversely exemplary’, because it is the exemplary case – as signifying the ‘chosen’, the ‘elected’, the universal people – of the impossible, paradoxical logic of exemplarity.⁵ Thus, if one gives in to the ‘formidable temptation’, the ‘unpleasant, narcissistic complacency’ that Derrida associates with exemplarity, one might identify the Jew as one who ‘testifies’, by virtue of his or her universality, ‘to the humanity of human beings’ and who therefore lives a divided identity, one which is not unitary (not an identity, therefore), because the only way to be ‘faithful to the hyperbolic, excessive demand … of a universal and disproportionate responsibility’ is to break with all particular bonds, places, or identities (Ibid., 12, 14, 13; cf. Hollander 2006, 135).
And so, with this paradox comes another. The more you are Jewish, the less you are ‘Jewish’; conversely, the less you are what you are (Jewish, in particular), the more you are what you are (human, in general and universally) (see Derrida 2004a, 41). It was in this context that Derrida introduced himself as ‘both the least Jewish, the most untrustworthy Jew ... and, at the same time he who plays at playing the role of the most Jewish of all’ (Derrida 2007, 13). He is both the least and the most (Jewish) insofar as he would call himself ‘Jewish’ at all—that is, only insofar as he would bear witness to, or profess a faith in, the ‘aporetic experience of undecidability or of the impossible’ (Ibid., 31). What is ‘rooted deep within the Judaic tradition’, then, to recall Dickinson’s formulation, is the radically contingent, rootless and unrootable ‘if’ of the (poetical or literary) ‘as if’.

Now, it is with respect to ‘this other mode of the “if”’, as Derrida says, this ‘force [that is] in keeping with an experience of the perhaps’ and that is irreducible to all the other ‘as if’s’, that Derrida offers something like a profession of faith (Derrida 2002, 235). Something like a profession of faith, ‘an appeal in the form of a profession of faith’, to return to my earlier question, yet not one, not belief as such (Ibid., 202). Here one should not give in to what Derrida elsewhere calls ‘the theological trap’: ‘the dream’, as Rudophe Gasché puts it, ‘of an absolute erasure of the trace’ (Derrida 1994, 161), whereby one might bypass the mediation of writing to access, however “approximately”, some unmediated experience. For the ‘perhaps’ is not, although it bears a close proximity to, an absolute origin. It does not provoke a religious experience, of ‘God’, for example. This is because différence is not an origin—it is ‘both more and less’ than this, Derrida says (Derrida 2004a, 54); it is another name for the trace (archi-origin), the spacing or the khôra by virtue of which an origin can present itself, retroactively, as original (Derrida 2004b, 327; 2007, 33). So why does Derrida associate undecidability with the ‘Jewishness’ of Judaism?

It is because, as we have seen, the heritage of ‘being-Jewish’ entails an oscillation between, on the one hand, one case among others of an undecidable difference between authenticity and unauthenticity and, on the other hand, a ‘hyper-exemplarity’ that threatens exemplarism itself (Derrida 2007, 29, cited above). In other words, ‘being-Jewish’ is both/neither another name for the trace or for différence, and/or the exemplary name for the logic of exemplarism which defies itself. In either case, to say ‘I call myself Jewish’ is to accede to the undecidable ordeal of what will have been my singular, undecidable identity, and to say ‘I offer something like a profession of faith’ in undecidability is to say
I offer something *like* a profession of faith in the unconditionality of absolute *différence*.

Thus the appeal to the undecidable ‘if’ (the ‘event’ that *perhaps* happens) is not a profession of faith as such. It is, rather, the supplement of faith, for it signals the *différence* of the faith/knowledge, performative/constative and fiction/truth oppositions. This point comes across most clearly when Derrida observes that the university is traditionally defined as the lone site of the production of knowledge and of forms of expertise, the expression of which must in principle be theoretical and constative, and the theoreticism of which has traditionally ‘[limited] or [forbidden] the possibility for a professor to produce *œuvres* or even prescriptive or performative utterances’; indeed, he continues, one must even ‘reaffirm’ this limitation because it is the very chance for ‘deconstructive unconditionality’ (Derrida 2002, 218). The protocols of theoreticism upheld by the university are the very chance for this ‘more than critical’ (deconstructive) unconditionality because deconstruction is the paradoxical manifestation of turning reason back onto itself (by asking, for example, ‘what is the reason for the principle of reason?’), thereby rendering reason *other to itself*, neither unified nor fragmented but folded, rather, internally divided, *différent*. In this sense, the exposure of *différance* is the consequence of honouring ‘the most classically metaphysical definition of responsibility’ (Derrida 1992, 10). It involves, in Derrida’s words, explaining

> effects through their causes, rationally; it is also to ground, to justify, to account for on the basis of principles or roots. . . . [T]he response to the call of the principle of reason is thus a response to the Aristotelian requirements, those of metaphysics, of primary philosophy, of the search for ‘roots’, ‘principles’, and ‘causes’ (Derrida 1983, 8),

and it ensues nowhere more graphically than in the subjection of reason itself to its own unconditional demand.⁷

Insofar as *différence* issues from a rigorous adherence to unconditional theoreticism (to the call of the principle of reason) and from an attachment to the classical understanding of responsibility that goes with it, then, the theoretical and constative expression of expertise *is* its very chance. But the very rigour demanded by unconditional theoreticism gives rise to a deconstruction of the faith/knowledge, performative/constative divides. Thus it also remains ‘that this unconditional theoreticism will itself always suppose a performative profession of faith, a belief, a decision, a public pledge, an ethico-political responsibility, and so forth’ (Derrida 2002, 218; 219). It will suppose
something like a profession of faith, that is, insofar as the performative, ethico-political pledge to responsibility that Derrida analyses in the act of professing a doctrine in the university issues from unconditional theoreticism, the principle of reason, itself. Indeed, the unconditional right to deconstruction is not only the right but indeed the imperative to ask critical questions ‘not only about the history of the concept of man’, but also about ‘the history even of the notion of critique, about the form and authority of the question, about the interrogative form of thought’ (Ibid., 204). And ‘this implies’, in turn, ‘the right to do it affirmatively and performatively’ (2002, 204); that is, not in a strictly theoretical or constative manner. Therefore it is clear that while the protocols of reason may call for unconditional theoreticism, our response can be neither purely theoretical nor purely a matter of ‘belief’.8 One responds, rather, with what we should call a supplement of faith: the surplus of responsibility that Derrida regularly evokes. A quasi-faith, then, in what I have referred to in the title of this paper as the ‘(non)existence’ or, one might say, the ‘impossible-possible’ (Derrida 2002, 234), of ‘deconstructive responsibility’, or of an ‘ethics under erasure’, as Nicole Anderson (2012) has put it.

III. But why does one respond?

Yet how can one account for Derrida’s endorsement of this ‘if’ or, why does one respond? As Derrida himself asks, ‘in the name of what and by what right can I still call myself [“jewish”]? And why do I hold on to it, even as I am not sure of the appellation to which I thus respond?’ (Derrida 2007, 30). He asks, but he does not answer, these questions. Clarifying the ethico-political stakes, he writes, ‘it belongs, perhaps, to the experience of appellation and of responsible response that any certainty regarding the destination, and therefore the election, remains suspended’ and, consequently:

> Whoever is certain [of having been called] ... transforms and corrupts the terrible and indecisive experience of responsibility and of election into a dogmatic caricature, with the most fearsome consequences that can be imagined in this century, political consequences in particular’. (Ibid., 31)

In other words: ‘I call myself “Jewish”, and I hold on to this appellation, even though I am not sure and can never be sure what it means, even though it is of the nature of any identity, so-called, to be uncertain, because uncertainty is of a piece with responsibility. Moreover, anyone who is certain (who pretends an understanding of what is, as such) is
an irresponsible dogmatist of the most politically and ethically egregious sort'. Or, to put this more succinctly, I call myself ‘jewish’ because to be ‘jewish’ is to be uncertain of being ‘Jewish’, to be uncertain of being ‘Jewish’ is to be responsible, and therefore to be certain of being (Jewish) is to be irresponsible.

It is important to notice that here ‘responsibility’ is tied to deconstruction as ‘more than critical, hyper critical’ (Derrida 2002, 204), to thought pointing to its own outside by asking questions about the very form of the question as a rebuttal to unthinking dogmatism; it is thus linked to the protocols of Enlightenment in general (see, for example, Derrida 2002, 205). But the claims that all identities are uncertain and that whoever professes certainty risks provoking ‘fearsome consequences’ do not tell us anything about what is peculiarly ethical about the demand to deconstruct, that is, about why this hyperbolic responsibility to reason imposes itself on me.

One might adduce two distinct possibilities. On the one hand, we might take Derrida’s answer to the question, ‘why do I hold on to an appellation of which I cannot be sure?’ as a consequentialist argument. Recall his claim that ‘whoever is certain [of having been called] … transforms and corrupts the terrible and indecisive experience of responsibility and of election into a dogmatic caricature, with the most fearsome consequences that can be imagined in this century, political consequences in particular’ (Derrida 2007, 30, 31; emphasis added). If, according to Derrida, one is compelled to pledge responsibility to the principle of reason because the alternative to doing so invites ‘the worst’ (Derrida 1994, 29), however, then he would appear to be endorsing a conditional and relativist form of responsibility, not one which corresponds with the language of ‘unconditionality’, ‘faith’, ‘profession’, ‘suffering’, a ‘compulsion to decipher the symptom’, ‘messianicity’, and so forth (see, for example, Derrida 2007, 15; 21). Similarly, in the context of his reading of psychoanalysis Derrida insists that ‘one must analyze the “one must” of analytic desire’, that is, the desire ‘to attain a primitive, proper, or elementary simplicity that would by rights be the sole and true point of departure, the sole legitimate beginning’ (Derrida 1998, 36). One must analyze the ‘one must’ of analysis, in short. All this suggests that more than consequentialism is at stake.

On the other hand, there is a second possibility. If ‘whoever is certain [of having been called] … transforms and corrupts the terrible and indecisive experience of responsibility and of election into a dogmatic caricature’, because being responsible in its most radical sense means subjecting oneself to the paradoxical consequence of turning reason back
onto itself, then this would suggest that the ethico-political responsibility of deconstruction is closer to that of the principled, deontological type. Derrida argues, to be sure, that his own notion of responsibility ‘goes against the autonomy, against giving oneself one’s law’, and would thus be unacceptable to a traditional philosopher such as Kant (Derrida 1996, 222). It is important to notice, however, why this is so. Derrida explains:

If I were active in taking a responsibility, in making a decision, I would easily appropriate the responsibility: it’s my decision, it’s my responsibility; and if it is mine, it follows that it would unfold my own possibility. If a decision and a responsibility are simply the unfolding of what is possible for me, then this is not a responsibility, nor a decision. (Ibid., 223)

In other words, the responsibility that opens one to the decision that perhaps takes place (the ‘impossible-possible’ of the event, or the ‘what if’ that undoes the as-if/as-such opposition), results from an ‘unconditional theoreticism’, a more principled principle even than Kant’s. As Derrida implies, Kant’s is a ‘limited or finite responsibility’, because it fails to ‘break with the programme’ or with ‘the simple deploying or unfolding of a possibility’; a break which the decision as decision always produces (Ibid., 223). In this case, however, the ethico-political dimension of Derrida’s thought is subject to the same challenge that faces deontological ethics in general, even though it is a far more radical formulation of the unconditional imperative: what, precisely, is the nature of its grasp on, its compulsion for, me? Significantly, neither Kant nor Habermas ever adequately answered this question; in both cases the responsibility to reason hinges on an ideological claim about the universal and necessary nature of a particular and contingent form of human subjectivity.  

It might be tempting to suggest that Derrida’s ‘belief’ hinges on a particular form of human identity as well, given his meditations on his relation to Judaism. As Dickinson observes, one cannot ‘lightly gloss over the fact that there is a relation between the structure of the “as if” and one’s (always personal) experience’, which in this case directly concerns Derrida’s Jewish heritage (Dickinson 2011, 97). Moreover, it is also fair to say (to return to a passage cited earlier), that ‘it is the aporia/antinomy of experience itself . . . that Derrida finds emblematically demonstrated within the historical “heritage” that is his own, namely, Judaism (Ibid., 97–98). But even if the ‘perhaps’ or the radical ‘if’ that deconstructs and displaces the opposition between the ‘as if’ and the ‘as such’ can be related to a certain ‘jewishness’, why endorse
it? Why call oneself ‘Jewish’ at all? Is Derrida tacitly presupposing an essence of Jewish identity or implying that, in a certain way, this unique heritage is constitutive? 

Being Jewish is, to be sure, imposed from the outside as a heteronomous responsibility. In Archive Fever, for example, Derrida considers Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s inclusion of Freud in the Jewish ‘we’ and, indeed, what it means to impose this inclusion on one who is no longer alive to respond. Derrida writes (with respect to Freud):

He cannot but say ‘yes’ to this covenant into which he must enter one more time. For he will have had to enter it, already, seven or eight days after his birth. Mutatis mutandis, this is the situation of dissymmetry and absolute heteronomy in which a son finds himself on being circumcised after the seventh day and on being made to enter into a covenant at a moment when it is out of the question that he respond, sign, or countersign. (Derrida, quoted in Hollander 2006, 133)

Thus, it might seem to follow, the very responsibility that Derrida associates with ‘jewishness’—with the ordeal of undecidability, with uncertainty, with the refusal of dogmatic nationalisms and so on—is imposed upon and thus inescapable for all (male) Jews. Exemplarily. I call myself ‘jewish’ because I am Jewish. This heritage of a responsibility to deconstruct associated with ‘jewishness’ is given already, before one had any say in the matter; it is the otherness both within one and without, which holds one hostage (see, for example, Derrida 2007, 23), and to which one cannot not respond. Therefore I call myself ‘jewish’.

But again, the point is not so simple. For, as we have seen, this is neither a ‘religious’ experience nor a particular identity. It is not a religious experience because ‘jewishness’ is another name for the logic of différance, not for a relation to God or to the sacred. One does not have faith in différance but pledges (or professes), perhaps, a quasi-faith in its imperative. And ‘Jewishness’ is not a particular identity either—not even that of a self-effacing, aporetic or contradictory (non)identity that undoes exemplarity itself—because, as it turns out, ‘Everyone would like to be the best example of identity as non–self-identity and so an exemplary Jew. From this point of view’, Derrida continues, those who ‘base their Jewishness on an actual circumcision, a Jewish name, a Jewish birth, a land, a Jewish soil, etc.–they would be no better placed than others for speaking in the name of Judaism’ (Derrida 2004a, 41, emphasis added; see also Hollander 2006, 135). In short, one may well be indelibly marked by one’s singular heritage and one’s particular
biography; Derrida clearly was and, I dare say, so are we all. But there are always other ‘others’, and other circumcisions, that happen all the time, in particular, through what Derrida calls the ‘universal circumcision of language’. As he explains:

[T]he poetical experience of language is from the outset an experience of circumcision (cutting and belonging, originary entrance into the space of law, non-symmetrical alliance between the finite and the infinite). And so, in quotation marks and with all the necessary rhetorical precautions, a ‘Jewish experience’. (Ibid., 43)

It is, finally, with respect to this ‘universal circumcision’, not to ‘Jewishness’ in its particularity, that Derrida offers something like a profession of faith.

Conclusion

So ‘how could one justify’ the endorsement of deconstructive resistance, as Derrida asks at the end of ‘The University Without Condition’? ‘Could it be done in principle?’ (Derrida 2002, 236, my emphasis). I would venture that it can, but that this would require, in turn, an understanding of why all modern subjects, not just nominally ‘Jewish’ ones, undergo a belonging-without-belonging that Derrida characterizes as ‘jewish’ (in the lower case), and thus why the responsibility that Derrida associates with ‘jewishness’—the ethico-political imperative of deconstruction—can be generalized. To be sure, deconstructive readings illuminate the potential moments of ideology within critical theories themselves, and in this sense deconstruction can be said to qualify as a certain kind of critical intervention into the very practice of critique that, for example, universities are supposed to inculcate. As I have argued, however, deconstruction does so because it entails an even more radical fidelity to the principle of reason than classical theorists of critique have practised. The question, as Derrida himself puts it, is therefore this: ‘what could be the responsibility, the quality or the virtue of responsibility, of a consistent discourse which claimed to show that no responsibility could ever be taken without equivocation and without contradiction?’ (Derrida 1992, 9) What, in short, is the nature of that responsibility which impels one to hold responsibility itself up to account? Alternatively, how is the uncertainty that Derrida associates with ‘being-jewish’ and with ‘Jewishness’ in general, tied to responsibility; why did this experience, which ‘sharpened [his] reasoned mistrust of borders and oppositional distinctions (whether conceptual
or not)’ push him ‘to elaborate a deconstruction as well as an ethics of decision, an ethics of responsibility, exposed to the endurance of the undecidable, to the law of my decision as decision of the other in me’ (Derrida 2007, 17, emphases his)? To this challenge, Derrida’s reflections on Judaism offer no direct response.

References


Notes

1. I leave aside the erroneous identification of the ‘to come’ (à-venir) with a future ‘horizon’, as I have elaborated elsewhere on the problem with this formulation (Gaon 2008, 351). Most importantly, the ‘to-come’ no more implicates a Kantian regulative Idea than does the responsibility that is at issue here.

2. Indeed, he writes, ‘this small word “as,” might well be the name of the true problem, not to say the target, of deconstruction’ (Derrida 2002, 234).

3. It is with respect to precisely this issue that Derrida ‘oscillates’, rather than with respect to the question of living as a Jew or a Gentile, ‘“as if” he were both, or neither’ (Dickinson 2011, 99).


5. But there are (paradoxically, no doubt) also other examples of (perversely) exemplary figures: ‘the woman, the non-European, the immigrant’; the excluded element can be any or all of the ‘figures of the other’ (Derrida 2004a, 48).

6. See Gasché’s brilliant ‘God, for Example’, for the fullest elaboration of the point that the figure of God is exemplary of exemplarity (1994, esp. 166).

7. One of the more direct formulations of the point that deconstruction is driven by the classical requirements of reason I have come across is the following: ‘On one hand, différance is set going by a desire, a movement, a tendency toward an origin that is constantly delayed, toward the future or the past . . . but at the same time différance is that which in a sense bars the origin’ (2004a, 54–5).

8. This is why David Tacey’s (2012) recently published argument that Derrida is really an ‘enchanted atheist’ who seeks to ‘affirm a sacred reality’ must be emphatically rejected.

9. This is not a baseless or frivolous charge. As I argue at length elsewhere, Kant’s justification of the categorical imperative is given most fully in Chapter 3 of the second Critique, where it emerges that the ‘apodictic law of practical reason’, through which the reality of freedom is ‘proved’, turns out to be not the principle of freedom as such, not the moral law which expresses it, and not even the mere consciousness of the moral law. What alone is ‘apodictic’, rather, is the specific experience of the ‘sublime’ feeling of ‘respect’ for the moral law (Kant 1993, 3; 8; 83). Thus the ‘root’ of the law’s ‘noble descent’ is ‘man’s’ ‘own personality’ as an intelligible being; it is directly because of ‘man’s’ sublime, supersensible nature that the moral law is ‘holy’ and thus exacts our unconditional respect (unpublished manuscript). Jürgen Habermas makes a similar (if less obviously metaphysical) claim with respect to the rational principles of discourse ethics. Based on the developmental psychology of Lawrence Kohlberg, he argues that the very possibility of functional subjectivity depends upon our communicative interaction—indeed, he says the alternatives are schizophrenia or suicide—and he therefore maintains that the rational impartiality that characterizes the moral point of view is the quasi-natural, inescapable, affectively compelling aim of both individual and social development (Habermas 1990, 102; 100) For a thorough-going critique of this argument, see Gaon (1998).
10. He writes, for example, that the experience of oscillation and undecidability related to his ‘being-jewish’ ‘has conditioned the decisions and the responsibilities that have imprinted themselves on my life. Moreover, it structures the most formalized, the most resistant, the most irreducible logic of all the discourses I believed I had to endorse . . . on the subject of writing and the trace, the relations between law, justice and right’, etc. (2007, 33).