Deus est Machina: Technology, Religion and Derrida’s Autoimmunity

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What kind of apparatus is the living God, and does he like life or not? Is there a God of the machine, and what does he want?

1.
In academic discourse, it has become almost a truism to claim that—far from being medieval, archaic, feudal or primitive—fundamentalism, in fact, belongs to modernity, is a creature, even a denomination of the modern itself, and would not be possible without it. Jürgen Habermas has made this argument on several occasions. But what exactly is the nature of this relationship? Is there a difference between saying that fundamentalism belongs to modernity and fundamentalism is modern? It seems so. Habermas says:

when movements inspired by religion strive for the reestablishment of an Islamic form of theocracy, we consider that to be fundamentalism. I would explain the frozen features of such a mentality in terms of the repression of striking cognitive dissonances. This repression occurs when... under the cognitive conditions of scientific knowledge and religious pluralism, a return to the exclusivity of premodern belief patterns is propagated. (2003: 31–32)

Fundamentalism belongs to modernity as a reaction against it. Premodernity emerges then but only in relation to, even as a back-formation, from modernity. Fundamentalism is not modern, therefore, even though it is a phenomenon of modernity. Modernity is complex and differentiated, and fundamentalism is nostalgic for the undifferentiation imagined as pre-dating it.

From this point of view, the relationship between fundamentalism and technology becomes interesting and complicated. To Habermas, fundamentalism is not naturally connected with the technological itself, but takes advantage of the implicit vulnerability of complex modern systems, from their putative outside:

Technically speaking, since our complex societies are highly susceptible to interferences and accidents, they certainly offer ideal opportunities for a prompt disruption of normal activities. These disruptions can, with minimum expense, have considerably disruptive consequences. Global terrorism is extreme both in its lack of realistic goals and in its cynical exploitation of the vulnerability of complex systems. (2003: 34)

Fundamentalism then is not a complex phenomenon, even though it might be at the heart of “our complex societies.” In this context, it uses complexity, but is not complex itself. In this reference, which to be fair is not only an explicit comment on the September 11, 2001 attacks, but is dated only three months afterwards (2003: 25) before shock could diversify into a range of self-conscious and considered reflections, there is what has become a very conventional, even conservative, understanding of what is at stake. Fundamentalism is really counter-modern and simple. In the complex west we might play a game of calling aspects of our own society fundamentalist, they might even nominate themselves in this way (it is worth remembering that fundamentalism was originally a proud act of self-description, not a term of abuse), but fundamentalism is really opposed to complexity, opposed to the modern differentiation of society into religious, political and academic domains. If it harnesses Western complexity, it does so not because it is in any way complex itself, but in a purely parasitic appropriation for cynical ends of the west’s complexity, turned against itself.
But why should the fact that fundamentalists use technology be automatically considered anomalous, and something that needs to be accounted for? Why should we assume that the relationship between fundamentalism and technology is an appropriation from the outside? That dimension of the argument is not explained. Instead, Habermas merely relies on the assumption that there is an incongruity between fundamentalists defined as those who seek a “return” to something, to the Caliphate, to the time when the Bible bolstered an unquestioning, straitened and strengthened family, when (perhaps even secular) values were more than effete and disingenuous. The modernity of technology—redolent of academic advancement and questioning initiative, of political sophistication and social and economic diversification—how can these things be harnessed by those who despise plurality, progress and self-overcoming, other than by an act of appropriation?

What lies behind Habermas’s argument is an assumed opposition between, on the one hand, religion as primitive and invested in the natural body, and, on the other hand, technology as cosmopolitan and the deployment of the enhanced, prosthetic body. The bifurcation here shows that it is too simple to say that religion is anti-body. The body is simultaneously discounted and invested, abused and enriched by religion functioning as the insistent intensifier of bodily cathexis in the form of mortification, symbolic consumption, spectacle and exultant discipline, a set of abandonments that both fathom and critique the body in an almost violent de- and re-sexualisation. In other words, far from condemning the body, religion mines it for a range of affects that are seen to make meaning available, sometimes but not always negatively. What’s more, this meaning pre-invests the body, which must therefore always emerge in a field in which nothing can precede the implicitly meaningful. This understanding of religion and the body should already alert us to the problem with the very logic that Habermas is seeking to deploy. The natural body of religion and the prosthetic body of technology cannot be kept sensibly apart, because both must be seen as the instantiation of a logic that pre-exists them. The use of technology by religious fundamentalism must be seen in relation to this more complex logic of meaningfulness.

The (religious) body cannot be simply seen as “appropriating” “our” technology to use against us, as if it comes from another world totally disconnected from a shared cultural history. The history of mutual appropriation between the Islamic world, if we can use such a term, and the West, if such a thing exist, is hardly simple. Who owns monotheism for example, or the Classical Greek legacy? Who appropriates what from whom? This is not a glib and facetious remark. Behind Habermas’s image of a technology appropriated from “us” is an amnesiac colonial configuration of a superannuated and archaic culture contriving its way into the present by stealing from the advanced world, with which it has no common history.

It is not enough then to argue that fundamentalism is opposed to the implicitly differential logic of the properly technological domain, even if this opposition is located within modernity itself. The aim of this paper is to argue that such a stable structure of opposition is inadequate to understand this relationship. However, that is not to say that the two can be reconciled, identified with or radically alienated from one another either. It is through an investigation of Derrida’s trope of autoimmunity—and how it has been applied to the related concepts of faith and knowledge, religion and reason, and centrally dogmatism and democracy, that a more nuanced sense of the complex imbrication of fundamentalism and technological culture may emerge.

2.
In his contribution to the book from which Habermas’s remarks come, Giovanna Borradori’s Philosophy in A Time of Terror, Jacques Derrida presents the terrorist attacks as an example of the autoimmunity of the democratic West. An autoimmune condition, he reminds us, is one where “a living being, in a quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunise itself against its own immunity” (2003: 94). The terrorists who attacked New York were in fact not something absolutely alien to the West, but had been fostered by it:

For let us not forget that the United States had in effect paved the way for and consolidated the forces of the ‘adversary’ by training people like ‘bin Laden,’ who would here be the most striking example, and by first of all creating the politico-military circumstances that would favour their emergence and their shifts in allegiance. (2003: 95)

This has now become a cliché, of course. I use it here merely to make clear what autoimmunity might look like as an historical episode. The defenders of democracy deploy in order to defend democracy that which is opposed to it.
prominent example that Derrida uses, and that was of course an intense one for him personally, was the cancellation by the Algerian government of elections in 1992, in order to stop the accession to power of the National Salvation Front, a Sunni organisation, and the first legal Islamist political party in the Arab world. Autoimmunitary movements “produce, invent and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome” (2003: 99). This is not necessarily a simple problem. We cannot merely shelter inside a dogmatism, albeit democratic, that might allow democratic victory to those who will destroy democracy. Nor can we, on the other hand, license the state apparatus to control anti-democratic dissent in a way that also will sacrifice democracy. The term autoimmunity then is not merely a label we can use to ridicule the pseudo-democracy of the nominally democratic yet still—sauflé nom—imperialist West. It poses to us a problem, identifies the aporetic situation in which we find ourselves in relation to the world politics of democracy. And this aporia will not be solved by the simple application of a political program that is absolutely clear and transparent to us. We simply cannot say that we know how to deal with this issue.

On the other hand, such a lack of clarity does not allow us to hide behind a simple relativism, where we can postpone the decision that dramatic and unpredictable historical circumstances require of us. We must make a decision within the complex of autoimmunity, without pretending that this decision is simply the automatic application of pre-calculated knowledge:

I have not seen anything in the facts that would give rise to any certainty or knowledge. Only a few signs to interpret. If there are responsibilities to be taken and decisions worthy of these names, they belong to the time of a risk and of an act of faith. Beyond knowledge. For if I decide because I know, within the limits of what I know and know I must do, then I am merely deploying a foreseeable program and there is no decision, no responsibility, no event. (2003: 118)

The aporia of autoimmunity deconstructs the distinction between primitive extra-Western pre-technological life and cosmopolitan Western prosthetics, and reveals that this difference cannot be merely rigidified into a logic of both an historical and spatial inside and outside, and that there are complications and mutual conditionings that make any simply Manichean construction of contemporary global politics chimerical at best, but probably merely ideological. The important thing is that this aporia demands a decision that cannot itself be automatic, that cannot be an application of the calculable and knowable. The calculable is a figure of the automatism of systems, and thus of technology in general. Decision must be enacted. To this extent it must emerge in the calculable world, but it must emerge there in relation to the excess of calculation, to the incalculable that makes decision not merely the application of a prefixed program. This open-ness to the incalculable is also, Derrida reminds us, an open-ness to the logic of democracy.

This challenges the logic by which the difference between pre-modern fundamentalism and modern democracy is conventionally evaluated. As the enactment of unquestionable principles that are to be implemented without the mediation of autonomous individual decision, fundamentalism is a style of calculation, and thus of rationalism. On the other hand, since democracy requires an open-ness to the incalculable and excessive—to a responsibility staged by way of a decision that cannot be simply pre-loaded from a system, a responsibility that must refer to an immeasurable other—it takes place in a domain that can never be simply rationalised. Both fundamentalism and democracy then take place within a complex economy in which calculability and incalculability—rationality and irrationality—are in a relationship that can never settle into simplicity or singularity. The entanglement here, as the quote above from Derrida evinces, involves investigating the complex relationship between faith and knowledge.

3.

It is simply too easy to dismiss fundamentalism as premodern and irrational. In fact, the arrogation of the name to certain “religious” practices—leaving aside the obscurity and complex, even imperialist, history of the very concept of “the religious”—disguises the absolute and dogmatic commitments made by the reputedly most modern societies, to freedom, for example, the market or human rights, commitments which rightly or wrongly could themselves easily be called fundamentalist. Each of these positions deploys a critical, even deconstructive, logic in service of a mission it understands as an historical inevitability. The challenge of fundamentalisms of all stripes is that we must work out how to deal with their
very modernity and their rationalism, not their imagined “primitivism.” Even the most supposedly archaic, the most astoundingly mad fundamentalisms always reveal a determined application to the present which they read and critique sceptically and thoroughly. We should not be fooled then by the rhetoric of return. Dogma always claims to be a logic of restoration, whether of a previously existing historical state, or perhaps a never yet realised natural tendency.

Derrida argues in “Faith and Knowledge,” that the present day return of the religious cannot be properly understood by recourse to the standard post-Enlightenment binarism that opposes religion and reason. The discounting of this opposition emerges through a contemplation of responsibility. Here, Derrida relies on the Levinasian trope of religion as a response, which can only arise by assuming a “principle of responsibility” (Derrida 2002: 64): “one must respond to the other, before the other and for oneself. And no responsibility without a given word, a sworn faith . . . without a pledge, without an oath, without some sacrament or ius iurandum” (2002: 64). However, this evocation of a pre-ontological other is not simply in excess of the rational, mundane and mechanical. It involves a kind of automatism of its own:

Presupposed at the origin of all address, coming from the other to whom it is also addressed, the wager . . . of a sworn promise, taking immediately God as its witness, cannot not but have already, if one can put it this way, engendered God quasi-mechanically. A priori ineluctable, a descent of God ex machina would stage a transcendental addressing machine. One would thus have begun by posing, retrospectively, the absolute right of anteriority, the absolute ‘birthright’ . . . of a One who is not born. For in taking God as witness, even when he is not named in the most ‘secular’ . . . pledge of commitment, the oath cannot not produce, invoke or convocate him as already there, and therefore as unengendered and, unengenderable, prior to being itself: unproducible. And absent in place. Production and reproduction of the unproducible absent in place. (2002: 64–65)

God then at the time of what is not even yet the beginning is already mechanical, and the logic by which we respond in the act of responsibility already being performed before our response requires this mechanical God to have always already automatically emerged, to be in fact the necessary automatism that we can define as the very idea of God’s unconditionality, the fact of his not being engendered. Here, the idea of natural spontaneity far from being paired with a logic of the mechanical it precedes and to which it always remains senior, in at least a notionally ethical sense, is itself quasi-mechanical, and thus itself an automatism.

The traditional post-Enlightenment binarism then that opposes religion and reason, or God and the machine, is unfit as a way of understanding what Derrida is calling here “the return of religion.” He writes:

Beyond this opposition and its determinate heritage . . . perhaps we might be able to try to “understand” how the imperturbable and interminable development of critical and scientific reason, far from opposing religion, bears, supports and supposes it. It would be necessary to demonstrate . . . that religion and reason have the same source . . . the testimonial pledge of every performative committing to respond as much before the other as for the high performance performativity of technoscience. (2002: 65–66)

Both reason and religion respond to the other in an act that values and validates an automatism. Yet, this identity is complex and irreducibly difficult. It can never remain stable. In conformity to the logic of the autoimmune—an idea that appears in this paper for the first time in Derrida—it threatens itself in the very manner by which it fulfils itself. Reason will turn on not only God but its own automatism.

The opposition of religion and reason therefore is not the war between two mutually exclusive things, but of one thing necessarily, even automatically, turning on itself:

The same unique source divides itself mechanically, automatically, and sets itself reactively in opposition to itself: whence the two sources in one. This reactivity is a process of sacrificial indemnification, it strives to restore the unscathed (heilig) that it itself threatens. And it is also the possibility of the two, of n+1, the
The doubleness imagined here as the common source of religion and reason always reproduces the uncompromised, the purity that guarantees religion as aspiration, and the opening to the prior other, before whom one is responsible.

Each of these two now confirmed styles of perfection, truth and the tribunal, involve a doubleness. On the one hand, the unscathed is a present absence, something to be restored; on the other, the tribunal requires a logic of otherness, of a turning that assumes difference. Within the common source, then, there is always division, because the relationship between the engendered and the unengenderable, between testimony and the true, between response and what commands responsibility will never let identity totally lose its disjunction. This failure of complete identity requires in turn a double response, which, inverse to its failure to become one, can never quite become two:

As for the response, it is either or. Either it addresses the absolute other as such, with an address that is understood, heard, respected faithfully and responsibly; or it retorts, retaliates, compensates and indemnifies itself in the war of resentment and of reactivity. One of the two responses ought always to be able to contaminate the other. It will never be proven whether it is the one or the other, never in an act of determining, theoretical or cognitive judgement. (2002: 66)

What appears to us as the fundamental contradiction between God and religion, on the other hand, and reason and technoscience, on the other, is in fact a division internal to the performative logic that gives rise to them both. These two share a common source as logics of the re-assertion of the unscathed—hence the ever-present rhetoric of return to or of something purer—and of testament, a performative that, because of its internally riven nature—there can be no restitution, nor any testament without doubleness—turns on itself as part of its own operation. Yet this doubleness does not preclude the fact of the deconstruction of the opposition between responsibility and automaticity, faith and knowledge, God and the machine. In fact, it makes the deconstruction a necessary part of their withheld but still recognised identity.

4.

The autoimmunity in the return of religion appears in the way even the most insistently proclaimed Abrahamic institutions—Derrida’s example here is the Vatican—rely on an ecumenical doctrine of universal brotherhood, which would seem to be more consistent with the logic of “God is dead” (2002: 79). On the other hand, such universal declarations of peace reflect an undiminished “European-colonial” impetus (2002: 79), grounded in Rome, one of the traditional centres of the rationalisation of European imperialism. These global declarations by religious authorities are really part of a struggle between identifiable groups for “access to world (transnational or trans-state) networks of telecommunication or tele-technoscience” (2002: 79). But it is too simple to talk about this as the appropriation of one cultural form by another. What emerges through the coordination between religion and technoscience is their common ground in a testimonial performativity:

Henceforth religion “in the singular” accompanies and even precedes the critical and tele-technoscientific reason, it watches over it as its shadow. It is its wake, the shadow of light itself, the pledge of faith, the guarantee of trustworthiness. The fiduciary experience presupposed by all production of shared knowledge, the testimonial performativity engaged in all technoscientific performance as in the entire capitalistic economy indissociable from it. (2002: 79)

Beneath both religion and techno-reason there emerges the same appeal and the same logic of presentation: the declaration of what is true for us before you. Yet, this commonality does not settle into a consistent and harmonious singularity. There remains a complication in the relation to self that produces the complex disjunctions that define the way the relationship between religion and reason, fundamentalism and technology appear.

The logic of autoimmunity in which identity advances itself by deploying that which ruins it requires a reaction against self,
a rigorous critique deployed by reason against reason, a contemptuous dismissal of the technological enablement that makes the advance of religion possible, on which the very return of religion depends. The critique directed by religion against the technological separates and identifies by way of reason a reason it condemns. What is at stake is not the alienation of one definite identity from another, but the instability of the attempt to make certain the standpoint of a reason that both is established and always potentially disestablishing. Religion, therefore, reacts against the machine because it can always evoke a beyond of reason. Yet, at the same time, this beyond undermines the very logic of critique that it wants to propose against reason. The critique proposed by religion only develops in the name of a propriation that cannot itself withstand the beyond of religion. Religion, in other words, grounds itself in a self-identity that the excess of religion over reason, faith over knowledge simultaneously disallows.

Religion in sum incarnates and relies on a certain rational techno-logic that it simultaneously distrusts, ridicules and abuses. Reason also emerges only within the complex made available by testimonial performativity that assumes a primary opening of truth through trust and faith. And the internal complexity here means that the deployment of faith and knowledge in their historical manifestations will always include a violence against itself:

This internal and immediate reactivity, at once immunitary and auto-immune, can alone account for what will be called the religious resurgence in its double and contradictory phenomenon. The word _resurgence_ . . . imposes itself upon us to suggest the redoubling of a wave that appropriates even that to which, enfolding itself, it seems to be opposed—and simultaneously gets carried away itself, sometimes in terror and terrorism, taking with it precisely that which protects it, its own antibodies. Allying itself with the enemy, hospitable to the antigens, bearing away the other with itself, this resurgence grows and _swells_ with the power of the adversary. (2002: 82)

The relation between reason and technology then is doubly open. Because the two are inextricably entangled with one another through the shared logic of testimonial performativity, they are in an automatic and mechanical mutual immanence. On the other hand, because they are in excess of one another they open to that in which such automatism comes undone. The machine and life are identified with one another automatically, yet the very incalculability of automatic reason opens this complex to that which exceeds it. Life is automatic and machinic, yet uncontainable; the machine is only possible because of a faith that assumes the living other up to the point of God.

Religion therefore can only be made possible by an automatism. “[T]he technical is the very possibility of faith, indeed its very chance” (2002: 83). Yet, faith always produces an irreducible excess over the technical. This excess is what makes faith faith. What is important to understand is that because they both spring from the shared logic of testimonial performativity, the excess of faith over the technical is not a clash that arises when the technical reaches its limit in an encounter with something wholly other to itself. It is the excess of a denomination of testimonial performativity over another and thus of testimonial performativity over itself. Indeed, it is the excess of what has made the technical over itself. The technical is then an automatism that cannot be closed off from the inevitable excess which will both make faith subordinate to and only possible by way of the logic of the technical, but that will always mean that the technical in its very iterability will not be allowed to withstand the excessiveness that faith will always open within it as its turning on itself. This open-ness to faith within the technical—indeed, the necessity of the double logic of testimonial performativity will always introduce into the technical—and mark out as an irreducible constituent of faith—the possibility of the incalculable, and thus of the risk of radical evil (2002: 83). Indeed, the very logic of incalculability exemplifies the inextricability of the relationship between the automatic and faith. Because of its very unconditionality, faith introduces an incalculability into reason that is incontestable and thus automatic. In sum, then, testimonial performativity opens automatically a field of faith that it conditions but that can never separate its own logic of immeasurability and excess from the automatism that makes it possible. “Instead of opposing them, as is almost always done, they ought to be thought together, as _one and the same possibility_: the machine-like and faith, and the same holds for the machinal and all the values entailed in the sacrosanct” (2002: 83).
The machine and faith then must be seen as one self-contradicting thing, under the logic of autoimmunity. This results in a complication in the identity of what we call “life.” The sacrosanct in its phallicism as the fetish puts into play a “colossal automaticity” (2002: 83) that serves life by separating it from itself. This implicit doubling of life in itself in the opening of the machinic allows for the possibility of a life against itself. This turning of life against itself as a single logic is a common part of the “sacrificial vocation” (2002: 86) of religion. Life is that which is to be elevated, but not in its literal mundane form, more as a fetish detachable in its sacrosanctity from the actual living. The unborn or the moribund are to be protected but the guilty are to be killed. Others are to be sacrificed en masse for the advancement of a compulsory freedom, not the freedom of people in their foreign ragtag disorganisation and impertinent ingratitude, but the freedom of freedom itself, a sacrosanct idea of which the actual living, especially in the babble of their obscure and unrespected cultural otherness, might not always prove themselves worthy. The living are not good enough for life: “the dignity of life can only subsist beyond the present living being” (2002: 87).

Religion then exceeds the automatic, but not in the way meaning eludes signification in the conventional romantic construction of the sublime. Religion exceeds the automatic in its own automaticity. The same holds true for whatever is analogous to this particular complex in Derrida’s argument: religion and reason; religion and technology; life and technology; faith and knowledge. Each of these pairs is to be understood as a convergent complex which reveals its excess to itself in its overcoming of its putative other, from which it can never be separated. The fundamentalist abhors the dis-anchoring of the deconstructive logic of rigorous critique but only by way of the deployment of its own deconstructive critique. Reason abhors religion but only through the deployment of its own faith. Historically and politically, what emerges are formations that deploy what subverts them as a necessary part of the unfolding of their operation. If we can reach as far as “life,” then life emerges not as the transcendent value to which all machines and systems are necessarily subordinate and subsequent, nor as the feeble “wet-ware,” to use William Gibson’s term, that technology will redeem by elevation to a condition of prosthetic post-humanity. The chimerical and enthusiastic discriminations at work in both these notions rely on different models of the gap between what is born and what is made, one that elevates it, and one that overcomes it. Instead, the unfolding of life is neither the refusal nor superaddition of the technical, but the excavation within life of what both makes and denies it and thus makes for the possibility of both a miserable refusal of vitality and a hope of something to come in the future.

This excess above and beyond the living, whose life only has absolute value by being worth more than life, more than itself—this, in short, is what opens the space of death that is linked to the automaton . . . to technics, the machine, the prosthesis . . . This self-contesting attestation keeps the auto-immune community alive, which is to say, open to something other and more than itself: the other, the future, death, freedom, the coming or the love of the other, the space and time of a spectralizing messianicity beyond all messianism. (2002: 87)

It is this that makes religion both a site of promise and a problem for us, both the repression of life, and increasingly when contentless and perpetually renamed, a site of the sense that something else might, even must, happen. Technology then emerges as that which both destroys and saves life, extends and enables it while compromising and limiting it, that emerges in its emergence and looms as its catastrophe, its extension to infinity and its greatest threat.

6. This interlacing of the religious and the technological is not a merely theoretical one, however. The immanence of the two in one another by way of testimonial performativity has real affects. Derrida discusses how contemporary wars of religion produce a double violence, ostensibly exhibiting two separate historical ages: one, the contemporary, “in sync or in step with the hypersophistication of military tele-technology—of ‘digital’ and cyberspaced culture” (2002: 88). The other Derrida calls a “new archaic violence” (2002: 88), one that insists on the reduction of conflict to the mutual violence of naked bodiliness, of rape, beheadings, mutilation and blood-letting, that reverts “as closely as possible to the body proper and to the premachinal living being. In any case, to its desire and its phantasm” (2002: 88). This violence thus constructs an idea of a base-line bodiliness which it then claims to be a revelation or recovery of what has been compromised by tele-technoscience. Yet it emerges not as the freeing of nature from beyond and before the evil contraposition of Westernisation, nor as the confirmation of cultural, social and religious archaism, and thus what would justify in reaction a racist
globalisation that wouldn’t then need to confess its logic. It is a reaction to tele-technoscience and thus only possible in relation to it. It is also thoroughly mediatised in its conception and dénouement: beheadings promised on video via satellite at the end of a long and cruel process of pleading, now, because of the reach of international communications, staged on a global scale: the desperate spouse, child, parent, sibling at home, perhaps anywhere, begging in the face of the world for a mercy conceded or refused for the benefit of a never less than global audience, for whom beheading has been chosen, not because it is the natural first choice for the primitives who exercise it, but purely reactively as the clearest signifier of their dissociation from the global logic that has staged their manifestations in the first place. In its historical enactment, there is no separation of the reaction from the provocation. Tele-technoscience provokes the new archaic violence: it produces a reaction that lays claim to a past it theatricalises not as a recovered natural space, but as the insistence on its own difference. As Derrida reminds us, the entanglements between life and technology are now so complex and unrecognisable—so automatic, in fact—that whatever we stage assumes a certain technical quality that we do not even acknowledge enough to deny.

This complex is no more (un-)apparent than in the reaction to the “expropriative and de-localising” (2002: 91) impetus of tele-technoscience, which at one level leads to the derealisation of all traditional markers of identity, and at another the rigorous refusal of such derealisation by the reinvigorated embrace of putatively bodily markers of cultural, moral and religious identity. These refusals are no less entangled in the logic of the technical than those that embrace them. On the other hand, the fetishisation of the technical is no less religious.

Behind both of these reflexes lies the commonality of testimonial performativity: I will proclaim the truth for you to you, the inevitability of the revelation of what is coming to the other, as both threat and fulfilment, promise and risk, to show that I have done what you asked by going beyond you, even mocking you. In both technology and religion then there is a logic of automatic manifestation, what will come true at the end of a process pre-ordained by an unconditional inevitability. What is to open is always already open, delivering us to a future duty of bearing the truth.

In the end, there is thus no simple separation, let alone opposition, between fundamentalism and modernity. Fundamentalism and modernity facilitate while denouncing one another. The same entanglement appears in the relationship between dogmatism and democracy. Democracy opens in the space of testimonial performativity the address to the pre-existing other, as the possibility of an orientation towards justice. Yet, justice in the name of the other must descend into politics as an idea. This politicisation of the idea always involves the convergence of identity and power. Yet the end of this convergence will always refuse the excess that has made it possible, and rigidify into dogma. Democracy, in turn, refuses to allow this convergence to become final. In other words, the dogmatism that democracy produces within and because of itself will always be defied by democracy. This is the logic of autoimmunity. Democracy will never simply disallow nor exclude dogmatism. It produces it as a necessary part of its operation. But it will always also exceed it. We must decide between dogmatism and democracy, even though we will never be able to separate them. But because of the irreducibly excessive nature of democracy, the decision has always already been made to exceed the dogmatic. This is why Derrida, in Politics of Friendship, separates the “unconscious” decision (Derrida 1997: 69) of the incalculable and democratic from the individual choice of liberalism. Because democracy cannot be closed off, and must always keep re-opening around the dogmatism that attempts to refuse it, a decision has been made before us, and automatically. Automatically the incalculable opens on that which both fulfils and ruins it.

Habermas is not wrong at all to link fundamentalism with modernity. To enclose it as the pre-modern within a larger, conceptually broader modernity, may facilitate judgements that are preliminary to salutary political action. The price, however, is the loss of insight into the complex economy terrorism has revealed. The stakes become clearer if we look at the equally complex entanglement of democracy and dogmatism. Democracy may always offer to exceed dogmatism, but not without provoking, facilitating, or even settling into, dogmatism. In our present global political situation, we may have seen the production here of the three parts of a chimera: the fundamentalism that despises democracy, but that only makes sense after it; the terrorism that democracy itself may seek to exploit on the side, or later justify, and, of course, the dogmatism that democracy becomes, simply as the alibi for unchecked and unembarrassed universalism. It is not in relegating fundamentalism to an imaginary “earlier” pre- of modernity that we can understand and deal with it, but rather as the permanent accompaniment of our dreams, of what our dreams reveal, and what they might allow themselves to allow, or
allow themselves to become.

References


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