

Spectral Dilemma¹

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Mourning to come, god to come.

[...] every man has two things belonging to him, namely, a life and a phantom.²

1. THE SPECTRAL DILEMMA

What is a spectre? A dead person who has not been properly mourned, who haunts us, bothers us, refusing to pass over to the ‘other side’, where the dearly-departed can accompany us at a distance sufficient for us to live our own lives without forgetting them, but also without dying their death – without being the prisoner of the repetition of their final moments. Then what is a spectre become the essence of the spectre, the spectre *par excellence*? A dead person whose death is such that we cannot mourn them.

1. Originally published as ‘Dilemme Spectrale’, in *Critique* 704-705, Jan/Feb 2006.

2. E. Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950), 12.

That is to say: a dead person for whom the work of mourning, the passage of time, proves inadequate for a tranquil bond between them and the living to be envisaged. A dead person the horror of whose death lays heavy not only upon their nearest and dearest, but upon all those who cross the path of their history.

Essential spectres are those of terrible deaths: premature deaths, odious deaths, the death of a child, the death of parents knowing their children are destined to the same end – and yet others. Natural or violent deaths, deaths which cannot be come to terms with either by those whom they befall, or by those who survive them. Essential spectres are the dead who will always refuse to ‘pass over’, who obstinately cast off their shroud to declare to the living, in spite of all evidence, that they still belong amongst them. Their end attests to no meaning, brings with it no completion. These are not necessarily shadows who declare their revenge, but shadows who cry out beyond all vengeance. Whoever commits the imprudence of lending an ear to their call risks passing the rest of his life hearing their complaint.

We will call *essential mourning* the completion of mourning for essential spectres: that is to say the accomplishment of a living, rather than morbid, relation of the survivors to these terrible deaths. Essential mourning assumes the possibility of forming a vigilant bond with these departed which does not plunge us into the hopeless fear – itself mortifying – that we feel when faced with their end, but which, on the contrary, actively inserts their memory into the fabric of our existence. To accomplish essential mourning would mean: to live with essential spectres, thereby no longer to die with them. To make these spectres live rather than becoming,

in hearing their voices, the mere shadow of a living being. The question which poses itself to us is thus the following: *is essential mourning possible – and if so, under what conditions?*

Is it possible, after a twentieth century whose history was dominated by odious deaths, to live a non-morbid relation with the departed, for the most part unknown to us, and yet still too close for our lives not to be secretly gnawed away at by them? At first glance, we seem to find ourselves constrained to respond in the negative. For this essential mourning seems impossible to envisage if it is referred to the general alternative of which the relation to the departed seems to admit. This alternative can be stated, summarily, in very simple terms: either God exists, or he doesn't. Or more generally: either a merciful spirit, transcending humanity, is at work in the world and its beyond, bringing justice for the departed; or such a transcendent principle is absent. Now, it becomes rapidly apparent that neither of these two options – let's call them for convenience religious or atheistic, however innumerable the ways in which they can be configured – allows the requisite mourning to take place. To say that God exists, or that he does not – whatever is thought through these two statements, both are paths to despair when confronted with spectres. To demonstrate this, let us directly exhibit, in the form of ‘cases for the defence’, what appear to us to be the strongest responses of each position to the challenge of such a mourning.

Take the following religious apology: ‘I might hope to come to terms with my own death, but not that of terrible deaths. It is terror in confronting these past deaths, irremediably past, not my coming end, which makes me believe in God. Certainly, if my disappearance, by some chance, should be terrible, then I shall die hoping for myself

what I hope for spectres. But I myself am but a spectre in waiting. I can be Sadducean for myself, and for others, but I will always be Pharisean for spectres. Or again: I might be rigorously atheist for myself, might refuse to believe in immortality for myself, but I could never do so for them: For the idea that all justice is impossible for the innumerable massed spectres of the past corrodes my very core, so that I can no longer bear with the living. Certainly, it is they, the living, who need help, not the dead; but I think that help to the living can only proceed given some hope for justice for the dead. The atheist might well deny it: for my part if I were to renounce this, I could not live. I must hope for something *for* the dead also, or else life is vain. This something is another life, another chance to live – to live something other than that death which was theirs.’

Now take the following, atheist response: ‘You want to hope, you say, for something for the dead. Let’s look closer, then, at what you promise them. You hope for justice in the next world: but in what would this consist? It would be a justice done under the auspices of a God who had himself allowed the worst acts to be committed, in the case of criminal deaths, or who himself had committed them, in the case of natural deaths. You call just, and even good, such a God. But what would you think of this: the promise to live eternally under the reign of a being called just and loving, who has, however, let men, women and children die in the worst circumstances, when he could have saved them without any difficulty whatsoever; who has even directly inflicted such sorrows – And even this, He says, as a mark of his infinite (and thus mysterious, unfathomable) love for the creatures he thus afflicts. To live under the reign of such a perverse being, who corrupts the most

noble words – love, justice – with his odious practices: isn’t this a good definition of hell? You say that in the dazzling presence of such a God, I will grasp the infinitely loving nature of his attitude to his creatures? You only succeed in exacerbating the nightmare you promise: for you suppose that this being has the power to spiritually transform me in such a radical fashion as to make me love He who allows such atrocities to occur, for having let those atrocities occur. This is a promise of a spiritual death infinitely worse than a merely bodily death: in the presence of God, I will cease to love the Good, for He would have the power to make me love Evil as if it were Good. If God exists, the exit of the dead is thus aggravated to infinity: their bodily death is redoubled in their spiritual death. To this hell you wish for them, I prefer, for them as for myself, nothingness, which will leave them in peace and conserve their dignity, rather than putting them at the mercy of the omnipotence of your pitiless Demiurge.’

We can see that each of these two positions is only supported by the weakness of the other: the atheist is atheist because religion promises a fearful God; the believer anchors his faith in the refusal of a life devastated by the despair of terrible deaths. Each masks his specific despair by exhibiting his avoidance of the other’s despair. Thus the dilemma is as follows: either to despair of another life for the dead, or to despair of a God who has let such deaths take place.

We will call *spectral dilemma* the aporetic alternative of atheism and religion when confronted with the mourning of essential spectres.³ In this aporetic alternative, we

3. I have called ‘religious’ every position which brings together the thesis of a life beyond the grave with the existence of a personal God; ‘atheistic’ every position

oscillate between the absurdity of a life without God, and the mystery of a God who calls 'love' his *laissez-faire* and production of extreme evil: the double form of a failure to accomplish essential mourning. On the contrary, we will call a *resolution* of the spectral dilemma a position which would be neither religious nor atheist, and which, because of this, would manage to extract itself from the double despair inherent to their alternative: despairing at the belief in justice for the dead, or believing despairingly in a God without justice. Our question concerning the possibility of essential mourning can be reformulated as follows: *Under what conditions could we hope to resolve the spectral dilemma?* How to think a bond between the living and dead which extracts itself from the twofold distress of the atheist and the religious believer?

To sketch a possible response to this question, we must proceed in the following fashion: we must exhibit the conditions of a solution to the dilemma, and evaluate the theoretical legitimacy of the latter along with its credibility. We do not exclude, of course, the possibility that this solution might eventually turn out to be illusory, and that we might have in the end to renounce extracting ourselves from the ateo-religious alternative. But this potential renunciation must proceed only from the precise examination of the solution. Not being able to present the

which recuses both of these theses. One might certainly conceive of positions which derogate from this convenient classification: Sadduceanism, evoked above, conjugates the belief in a personal God with the refusal of immortality; Spinozism, on the other hand, conjugates the recusal of a personal God with the thesis of a possible immortality. However, such positions do not change the essential point of the analysis: the incapacity of the principal systems of representation to resolve the spectral dilemma. In the case of Sadduceanism, I add to the despair of an evil God the despair of the non-resurrection of the dead; in the case of Spinozism, I must renounce all hope of a happy immortality for those who perished too soon to accede to wisdom, and accommodate myself to the pitiless necessity which presides over this type of destiny.

latter in its totality, we will content ourselves here with commencing its exposition.

2. CONDITIONS FOR THE RESOLUTION OF THE DILEMMA: THE DIVINE INEXISTENCE

Let us begin by exposing what we shall call the 'formal' conditions for a resolution of the dilemma. These conditions constitute at once the irreducibly legitimate part of the two preceding positions – atheistic and religious – and the source of the aporia. Each of these positions of the dilemma exhibits, we believe, an indispensable element of essential mourning:

- the religious position establishes that mourning is not possible unless we can hope for the dead something other than their death. The spectres will not pass over to the other world until the day we might hope to see them rejoin ours.
- The atheistic position establishes that the existence of God is an insurmountable obstacle to the elaboration of such despair, for only a perverse God could permit terrible deaths, and only an even more perverse God could make himself loved for doing so.

The aporia stems from the fact that these two conditions, equally indispensable, appear incompatible. There is only one way, then, to lift this impasse: we must prove that the incompatibility between these conditions is only apparent, and that there exists a third option, neither religious nor atheistic, capable of coherently combining the two elements of the response. From this point on, our path is clear: *resolving the dilemma comes down to making thinkable the statement*

conjugating the possible resurrection of the dead – the religious condition of the resolution – *and the inexistence of God* – the atheistic condition of the resolution. These two elements will be synthesised in the following statement, which will occupy our attention from now on:

God no longer exists.

This statement formulates a thesis which we will call the thesis of *divine inexistence*, an expression that must be understood in the twofold sense that permits its equivocality. Firstly, in an immediate fashion, the divine inexistence signifies *the inexistence of the religious God*, but also the metaphysical God, supposed actually existent as Creator or Principle of the world. But the divine inexistence also signifies *the divine character of inexistence*: in other words, the fact that what remains still in a virtual state in present reality harbours the possibility of a God still to come, become innocent of the disasters of the world, and in which one might anticipate the power to accord to spectres something other than their death.

The position of the divine inexistence allows us to grasp the source of the apparent insolubility of the spectral dilemma. The latter comes from the fact that atheism and religion seem to constitute an alternative exhausting all the possibilities: either God exists, or he does not. But the two theses are in truth stronger than these factual statements: for their sense lies in the supposedly *necessary* character of either the inexistence or the existence of God. To be atheist is not simply to maintain that God does not exist, but also that he could not exist; to be a believer is to have faith in the essential existence of God. We now see that the thesis of the divine inexistence must, to gain ground against such an alternative, shift the battle to the terrain of modalities:

It is a question of maintaining that *God is possible* – not in a subjective and synchronous sense (in the sense that I maintain that it is possible that God currently exists), but in an objective future sense (where I maintain that God could really come about in the future). At stake is the unknottling of the atheo-religious link between God and necessity (God must or must not exist) and its reattachment to the virtual (God could exist).

The question then takes on a greater precision: resolving the spectral dilemma comes down to exhibiting the exact sense of the divine inexistence, at the same time as establishing that one can legitimately adhere to it.

The thesis – God no longer exists – can be decomposed according to two poles of signification which must then be studied consecutively:

1. What must be signified by a ‘no longer’, in order for a god to be thought as one of its eventualities? Such an examination comes down to thinking the signification of a time compatible with essential mourning: What is time, if it contains the divine as one of its virtualities, and what could legitimate our belief in the effectivity of the latter?
2. What does the signifier ‘god’ really mean once the latter is no longer posited as existing – as possible and to come, but no longer as actual and necessary? Such an examination would necessitate, notably, an elaboration of the elements of a discourse on the divine distinct from all theology founded on the thesis of an eternal God.

Within the confines of the present article we can only broach the first point. We will thus agree here to understand

by ‘god’ the minimal sense required for an essential mourning to be envisaged: the emergence of a regime of existence in which, for the spectres, something begins other than their death.

3. SPECULATIVE TREATMENT OF HUME’S PROBLEM

What would a time capable of divine emergence be? And what could make us decide to adhere to the idea of such a time, knowing that our all-too-evident desire to believe, far from rendering the task easier for us, can only increase our suspicion in regard to every plea which flatters our hopes?

Before entering into the heart of the subject, let us begin by distinguishing the so-called ‘occult’ senses of the divine inexistence, that is to say those which rest upon the thesis that a hidden law exists, unknown for the moment, but capable of being at the origin of a redemption to come. This thesis comes down to an atheistic or religious interpretation of the divine inexistence, depending on whether it will be a question of founding the hope of rebirth on the Promethean mastery of death by a future humanity supposed technically capable of effectuating it; or a question of maintaining that a necessary process of divinisation of the world is already secretly in progress, which will culminate in universal justice for the living and the dead alike. In both cases, one maintains that an occult law exists upon which all hopes must rest: a natural law not yet known, of the resurrection of bodies, a providential law of progressive emergence of the divine – indemonstrable, even fantastic, theses, incapable in any case of supporting any serious hope.

But as soon as we prohibit ourselves any such path, we

must say of the sought-after God not only that it must be posited as inexistent and possible, but also that it can only be conceived as *contingent* and *unmasterable*. This God, in fact, cannot be posited except as contingent, in the sense that, if its thinkability supposes that nothing prohibits its advent, inversely, no destinal law can be supposed to guarantee its emergence, for such a supposition is still theoretically exorbitant. It must be able to be, but nothing can be thought that constrains it to be. And this God can only be thought as unmasterable in its advent, in the sense that it must exceed all phantasmatic hopes of absolute domination of nature on the part of man. Neither Prometheanism of death vanquished, nor providentialism of a god to come – which are just exacerbated versions of atheism and religion confronted with the spectral dilemma – can found the hope of a solution.

Taking as granted the following hypotheses:

1. The laws of nature do not allow us to hold out any serious hope of a future rebirth of the departed.
2. Neither is there any hope of a transcendent Order of laws of nature, a bringer of justice for living and dead, whether actually at work, or in the course of emerging.

What outcome remains to us? It suffices, in response to this question, to determine what it is in such hypotheses that constitutes an obstacle to essential mourning: What seems to prohibit any resolution of the spectral dilemma, once I renounce the idea that a law exists, either natural or supernatural, capable of realising my hopes? The response is obvious: If I admit that there only exist natural laws incapable of resolving my dilemma, then this dilemma is

insoluble, in so far as – but only in so far as – I admit also *the necessity of the laws of nature*. It is not the incompatibility between the laws of nature and the divine which prevents essential mourning; it is the belief in the necessity of such laws. And it is indeed this modal thesis which founds the atheistic belief in the impossibility of the existence of God, as of any event contradicting the attested constants.

The first question we must treat is thus as follows: what founds my adhesion to the necessity of laws, and thereby my refusal of any possible event's contradicting them? Now, this problem is well-known since it is precisely *the question posed by Hume concerning the rational justification of our belief in causal necessity*. We are consequently confronted once more by this question, but – let us note well, for this is the speculative interest of the matter – we must tackle it 'backwards' in relation to its traditional treatment.

Let us explain. The usual way of posing the question of causal necessity proceeds with the interrogation as formulated by Hume himself, and which can be stated as follows: it being understood that we believe in the necessity of laws, can this belief be founded in reason, so as to guarantee that laws will be in the future what they are today, all other circumstances being equal? The aporia encountered by Hume consists in the fact that neither logic nor experience are able to offer any such justification. For, on one hand, there is nothing contradictory in the observable constants being modified in the future; and, on the other, experience teaches us only about the present and the past, not the future. So that the supposed necessity of natural laws becomes an enigma since the Principle of Sufficient Reason cannot be effectively applied to it: We cannot rationally discover any reason why laws should be

so rather than otherwise, that is to say why they should remain in their current state rather than being arbitrarily modified from one moment to the next.

Now, our perspective is the inverse of Hume's: for we propose on the contrary to start out from the *effective possibility* that natural laws might break down without reason, in favour of an eventuality incompatible with them. For we pose the following question: since Hume has convinced us that we could *a priori* (that is to say without contradiction) conceive a chaotic modification of natural laws, why not have confidence in the power of thought, which invites us to posit the *contingency* of the laws of nature, rather than in experience, in which alone the presentation of the apparent fixity of observable constants finds its source? Why extrapolate the empirical fixity of laws into a belief in their necessity, rather than adhering to the intellection of a radical Chaos which Hume has masterfully, if implicitly, revealed to us? Why not, in other words, *absolutise* the failure of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, by maintaining that the meaning of that absence of reason for laws which we run up against in the Humean problem is not an incapacity of thought to discover such reasons, but a capacity of thought to intuit *a priori*, in the real itself, the effective absence of the reason of things as laws, and the possibility of their being modified at any moment? It would be a question of making of contingency the absolute property of every being, laws as well as things – a property which a redefined reason, *a reason emancipated from the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, would take as its task to conceive and to describe. Thus the idea presents itself of an *inverted*, rather than a *reversed* Platonism, a Platonism which would maintain that thought must free itself from the fascination for the phenomenal fixity of laws,

so as to accede to a purely intelligible Chaos capable of destroying and of producing, without reason, things and the laws which they obey.

Does this mean that we will have resolved Hume's problem when we have posited the contingency of laws rather than their necessity? No, indeed, for we are then confronted by another problem, in the form of an objection expressing the reason why our thesis does not appear credible, namely: If laws could be modified without reason at any moment, it would be *extraordinarily improbable* if this possibility were never to manifest itself. And in truth, if matter could incessantly, in the least of its parts, follow innumerable different laws, the disorder would be such that there would not even be manifestation. This argument, as we know, is the very core of Kant's transcendental deduction: the contingency of laws is incompatible with the constitutive stability of representation. But our task is more precise now: to resolve the reformulated Humean problem, *we must refute such an inference, from the contingency of laws to a frequent, even frenetic, disorder, whether of matter or of representation; we must establish that the manifest stability of laws does not demand that we maintain their necessity.* Such is the first problem – which is far from being the last – that the spectral dilemma obliges us to resolve if we would recuse the impossibility of a counter-natural event coming to pass. From this point on, God must be thought as *the contingent, but eternally possible, effect of a Chaos unsubordinated to any law.*

Let us agree to call *speculative* all philosophies which accord to thought the capacity to accede to an absolute, and *metaphysical* all philosophies which ground themselves on a modality of the Principle of Sufficient Reason to accede to

the absolute. All metaphysics, according to this reading, cannot but be speculative; however, not all speculation is necessarily fated to be metaphysical. For speculation which founded itself on the radical *falsity* of the Principle of Sufficient Reason would describe an absolute which would not constrain things to being thus rather than otherwise, but which would constrain them to being able not to be how they are. We can therefore formulate the conclusion at which we wished to arrive at, namely that *the existential resolution of the spectral dilemma passes by way of the speculative, but non-metaphysical, resolution of Hume's problem.*

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A few words, to conclude, on the inexistent god. How – according to what principles of investigation – might one attempt to designate its nature, once the latter is defined as a contingent effect of Chaos? On this point, we must agree to pose again, outside the transcendental field, a Kantian-style question: What am I permitted to hope for, now that I can hope? What is a god which would be once more desirable, lovable, worthy of imitation? If one supposes granted the real eventuality of emergences in rupture with the present laws of nature, what will be the most singular possible divinity, the most interesting, the most 'noble' in a sense (paradoxically) close to Nietzsche's? Must this future and immanent god be personal, or consist in a 'harmony', a becalmed community of living, of dead, and of reborn? We believe that precise responses to these questions can be envisaged, and that they determine an original regime of thought, in rupture with both atheism and theology: a *divinology*, yet to be constituted, through which will be fabricated, perhaps, new links between men and those who haunt them.