



The Deconstruction of Ultra-Sovereignty and the Quasi-Concept of Khôra in Jacques Derrida

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Abstract

The article aims to shed light on Derrida's criticism of the notion of ultra-sovereignty (*walten* in the original German) in Heidegger. We will show that, although this conception goes down in history in a post-ontological field in relation to traditional metaphysics, *walten* produces an ethical problem in the eyes of Derrida, since it affirms a non-human violence prior to the being itself and which would, therefore, cross the entire *physis* and the human. By inscribing it in a movement of de-ontologization, we will show that Derrida, with his quasi-concept of *khôra*, establishes an unconditional ethics prior to the being and in which the *anthropos* is placed. In doing so, Derrida thinks of sovereign violence as something secondary to non-violence (thus distancing himself from (post)ontological narratives as in Nietzsche, Artaud, Heidegger and Bataille) and, for that, he supports the notion of *khôra*.

Keywords: Derrida; *Khôra*; Sovereignty; Ethics; Heidegger

The Deconstruction of Ontological Sovereignty: Heideggerian *Walten*

We will divide our article into two parts: in the first, we will approach the notion of *walten*, based on Derrida's reading of Heidegger. Our objective is to present a post-ontological conception based on the idea of sovereign violence. In the second part, we will present the deconstruction of this idea, mobilized by Derrida from the reading of the notion of *khôra* in Plato. Our objective will then be to show how the deontologization movement, in Derrida, shifts the issue of sovereign violence to a primary and unconditional ethics that precedes it. Our objective will then be to show how the deontologization movement, in Derrida, shifts the issue of sovereign violence to a primary and unconditional ethics that precedes it. We will therefore think about the injunction

between the proposition of the quasi-concept *khôra* in on the name and the critique of the notion of *walten* in The Beast and the Sovereign II, articulating two moments in Derrida's work around the issue of ethical deontologization.

What is the Being as such from which everything arises? This is the fundamental question of metaphysics as formulated by Derrida and which, according to his view, goes through the Aristotelian philosophy, and its continuity – with the figure of God – crossed the last centuries of Roman antiquity, gained strength in the Middle Ages and reached the contemporary world. The Being as such explains the being of totality, it is the word that brings together the meaning of the whole, that which Derrida called *metaphysics of presence*, for the being as such is always present to oneself. The cause of everything – sometimes *causa sui* – this ontological sovereignty is often

not only transcendent, but transcendental and presents itself as the foundation of empiria, which gives way to the ideas of onto-politics and onto-ethics. Heidegger, however, proposes – as in *The question of being* (1956) – to erase the word *being* (a procedure also called effacement, which makes the word insufficient but necessary), and replaces it, should we remain within the already too unstable limits of the seminar *The beast and the sovereign* (2001-2003), with the word *walten*, which Derrida translates as «prior» ultra-sovereignty and «superior» to the being as such. More than sovereign, *walten* is ultra-sovereign [1,2].

Now, in this historical game of mirroring between the being of the human and the being of the totality, where (post)ontology and anthropology meet, *walten* is used synonymously with inhuman violence, which generates all that the human is and goes through the human. Considering that *walten* is the post-ontological instance (beyond being), that is to say, that this notion provides a step out of the onto-theological metaphysics whose deconstruction Derrida is committed to, what are the perspectives that this understanding entails, which places excessive violence in the origin, in the understanding of our human «we»? In other words, to what extent does Heidegger naturalizes violence based on this ultra sovereignty that contaminates all *physis*, in which the human is included?

Etymologically “sovereignty” comes from Latin *super* or *above*, *principal*, in the sense of supreme, that which possesses a quality in its highest degree. Throughout history, man (in a fallocentric perspective, which often excludes woman) is identified with the sovereign, be it with sovereign reason (as in the case of Seneca, Cicero and the Stoics), God (as in the case of most medieval philosophers), the State (as in the case of Bodin and Hobbes), or the concept and figure of the Self in modernity (as Foucault wondered). These figures can certainly multiply, but it is not our intention to make a cartography of the correlation between ontological sovereignty and philosophical anthropology. Let us say only that sovereignty is a determining premise in the relations between ontology and anthropology and that for Derrida it exceeds the political sphere in which its conception took place in modernity – apparently first applied to monarchy, despite the medieval notion of *summa potestas* – as, for example, according to Bodin and Hobbes. One of Derrida’s peculiarities was to think about sovereignty relating it to ontology through the idea of *arkhé*. In the political field, sovereignty has multiple meanings but generally designates an authority upon which no other is imposed, be it the monarch, the people or the State. Sovereignty, this ultimate decision-making level, finds its foundation in itself, it founds itself and thus takes control of the law.

Why then give, as Derrida does in *The beast and the*

sovereign, to Heidegger’s conception of *walten* the translation of ultra-sovereign using a conception of political philosophy to name what produces the ontological difference? If the lexicon involving Heidegger’s *walten* refers to a vocabulary of power, violence, non-anthropological violence and if, according to Levinas, ethics is “prior” to ontology, to which ethics, considering that Derrida gives great importance to Levinas formulation, does this conception of *walten* refer? Why use the hyperbole (*ultra*, *hyper*), as Derrida does so frequently, to designate a level that would not admit another superior to it, as in the case of the word sovereignty?: «*walten* seems to be so sovereign, ultra-sovereign, in sum, that it would further be stripped of all the anthropological, theological and political, and thus ontic and onto-theological dimensions of sovereignty» (p. 279) [3]. The problem worsens due to the unstable meaning *walten* has in the Heideggerian text. Gathering such meanings, Derrida proposes, as in some other passages, an interpretation of *walten*:

I concede that this is difficult to translate, but the word *walten* deserves a stronger accent, the strongest possible, in fact. *Walten* is dominant, governing power, as self-formed sovereignty, as autonomous, autarcic force, commanding and forming itself of the totality of beings, beings in their entirety, everything that is. *Physis* is the *Walten* of everything, which depends, as *Walten*, only on itself, which forms itself sovereignly, as power, receiving its form and its image, its figure of domination, from itself. *Walten* as *physis*, *physis* as *Walten* is everything; *physis* and *Walten* are synonyms of everything, of everything that is, and that is, then, as originarily sovereign power (p. 72) [3].

This idea translates the aporetic foundation of the notion of sovereignty in modernity, as Derrida said about Hobbes and Bodin. On the one hand, sovereignty dictates the exercise of the law guaranteeing to each particular individual (who alienates part of his freedom) security and prosperity, considered the true freedom. On the other hand, sovereignty is what exceeds the law, since nothing commands it (it involves a certain unconditionality) and whose most evident face are the times of exception and war, embodied in the figure of the sovereign. Sovereignty exceeds even the human measure, its most explicit sign is Leviathan, and it refers to the lawless land, the dominance of the strongest, which characterizes *animalitas*. And Derrida did not fail to fill his thesis with the multiple mythological, philosophical, historical, literary narratives of how this *animalitas* crosses the conceptions of sovereignty. Sovereignty would then gravitate, from its conception as *logos*, as that which through politics reconnects the human to being, to the supreme, to supremacy, and that which in the human is inseparable from his/her animal nature, understood as the power of the strongest.

Against traditional metaphysics, *walten* shuffles the conceptual pair being/non-being getting closer to what would traditionally be called a paradox. Origin that is not origin, groundless foundation, fusion between *arkhé* and anarchy, which could not be reached only through *logos* (or any scientific method), but through a deepening of existential analysis (which also places movement below subjectivity). There is therefore a kind of supplement to the Being that does not obey the *logos*, which marks a relevant difference between Aristotle and Heidegger, since this ultra-sovereignty also summons the words force, violence, absolute power, unlimited, and is at the same time *physis*, *autopoiesis* as growth, co-relationship that re-launches the human in the common field of animality but from which *Dasein* is detached thanks to its unique ability to question the meaning of being, although the sovereignty of human subjectivity is questioned because of this ontological sovereignty that crosses it.

The sense of sovereign and superhuman violence of *Walten*, of the all-powerful reign of *physis* appears the most clearly in Heidegger's elucidation when he makes clear that humans themselves are dominated, crushed, under the law of this sovereign violence. Man is not its master, he is traversed by it (...), man is dominated, seized, penetrated through and through by the sovereign violence of the *Walten* that he does not master, over which he has neither power nor hold (p. 41) [3].

Heidegger inserts in the historical plot of ek-sistence the a-historical reason for ultra-sovereignty. On the one hand, the human being, *Dasein*, is the privileged entity that has the relationship with the Being. However, this proximity to the Being does not give him/her at all any power since this Being is perennially beset by the differentiating and creative power of *walten*.

Heidegger's thought leads to two fundamental questions in Derrida's philosophy: that of humanistic metaphysics and that of the closure of this metaphysics. On the one hand, the notion of *walten* could not completely escape the various traces that constitute it and this is where the onto-theological heritage matter is placed. On the other hand, the impossibility of executing the project of *Being and time* (1927), of destroying or overcoming onto-theological metaphysics allows Derrida to transform this destruction into an incessant deconstruction of onto-theological metaphysics, which also means elaborating a field outside this metaphysics (we should remember the ambiguity of this "outside" expressed in the introduction of *Margins of philosophy*), where *walten* would paradoxically be inscribed. Derrida presented this idea of a field outside ontology with his notion of supplement since 1967, in 1993 in his understanding of *khôra*, and also in *Specters of Marx* (1993), whose proposed spectrology

exceeds ontology and the question of being [4].

As it goes through *physis*, this ultra-sovereignty unfolds, is shared, and divides itself among the entities. For Derrida, *walten* becomes the image of sovereignty as an unshared power, distant from sharing and the community of differences, as well as from *autopoiesis* as heteronomy.

Derrida's conception of *walten* thus considers not only its ontological key but also its ethical and political consequences. The critique of violence and the critique of power take into account this inhuman feature (*walten*) that erupts in human existence. However, unlike Heidegger, who refuses to elaborate an ethics, it is not possible to separate Derrida's understanding of *walten* in *The beast and the sovereign* from the entire network of quasi-concepts he had developed earlier and which confront it in the ethical field: gift, responsibility, hospitality, forgiveness, and especially the unconditional. Through the thought of the unconditional, Derrida left the sphere of *arkhé*, marked by the idea of an original transcendental violence, for the field of the quasi-transcendental, whose idea is to show unconditionality as a quasi-condition of every condition, its quasi-cause in permanent in-determin-ation. In doing so, Derrida not only distances himself from the field of ontological sovereignty but also inserts the unconditional as prior to being, which can no longer be described in the simple terms of an originary violence as *arkhé* (not even in a fusion between *arkhé* and anarchy, which would resolve the duality in a synthesis). In this sense, violence is part of a movement of differentiation that precedes it, and Derrida drew upon art, psychoanalysis, and politics to think about, work with, and direct this violence, rather than simply liberate, repress, or domesticate it. Derrida elaborated another dethroning quasi-concept of *walten*, in relation to which *walten* becomes a historical, contextual image of an onto-politics of Heideggerian extraction: *khôra*.

De-Ontologization and Ethics in the Quasi-Concept of *Khôra*

Our new exposition of the universe then must be founded on a fuller classification than the former. Then we distinguished two forms, but now a third kind must be disclosed. The two were indeed enough for our former discussion, when we laid down one form as the pattern, intelligible and changeless, the second as a copy of the pattern, which comes into being and is visible. A third we did not then distinguish, deeming that the two would suffice: but now, it seems, by constraint of our discourse we must try to express and make manifest a form obscure and dim. What power then must we conceive that nature has given it? Something like this. It is the receptacle, and as it were the nurse, of all becoming (p.171) [5].

Therefore the mother and recipient of creation which is visible and by any sense perceptible we must call neither earth nor air nor fire nor water, nor the combinations of these nor the elements of which they are formed: but we shall not err in affirming it to be a viewless nature and formless, all-receiving, in some manner most bewildering and hard to comprehend partaking of the intelligible. (; p.179) [5].

The notion of *khôra* (drawn upon Plato's *Timaeus*), which we take up here from the book *Khôra* (1993) and from some passages of *Faith and knowledge* (1996), strangely designates a pre-origin that is not the origin of the origin, like *walten*, and whose paradigm, as in Heidegger's case, is not the question of being; in fact, it abdicates all paradigms (p. 90) [6]. Alongside necessity and reason in the formation of all that is, Plato points this errant cause and to a strange and unfamiliar discourse of probability (p.171) [5]. Inaccessible, impassible, amorphous¹, it is ~~not~~ (and this *non-being* is not the same as that of Parmenides, as opposed to being, because he paradoxically affirms it), and can only *announce* itself (not allowing itself to be captured as a presence), that is, equally not allowing itself to be conceived through anthropomorphic schemes (p. 95) [6]. *Khôra* is the mother, the nurse who receives and gives, as opposed to the sovereign father, "intelligible and changeless" (p.171) [5].

This description by Derrida is enough to show the difficulty of thinking something like an ultra-sovereignty marked by violence, since *arkhé*, sovereignty, and violence still refer to a human point of view that ends up contaminating, as we will see, *walten's* non-anthropological character. *Khôra* escapes all anthropo-theological schemes, all history, all revelations, all truths (p.124) [6]. Beyond philosophical discourse, because it is not reduced to *logos*, it demands that *logos* be impure, threatened, hybrid, bastard (p. 126) [6] and thus is distinct from the purity of non-being of negative theology to which Derrida associates *walten* («the third kind [*khôra*] is space everlasting, admitting not destruction, but affording place for all things that come into being, itself apprehensible without sensation by a sort of bastard reasoning, hardly matter of belief» (p.185) [5]. *Khôra* is a place not fixed by concept (always prior, acquired beforehand and which, therefore, brings forward the experience of the absolutely other). We are dealing here with another economy, different from that which links traditional metaphysics to the conception of *walten* as a privilege given to the question of Being or *arkhé*: an economy based on

difference, which transposes – and this is our point – the pole of ontology to reach a primary ethics, which does not allow itself to be thought of as totality. Correlational economics of difference: «she [the nurse of becoming] is at no part of her in even balance, but being swayed in all directions unevenly, she is herself shaken by the entering forms, and by her motion shakes them again in turn» (p.187) [5]. Instead of organizing the real as an ideal configuration, *khôra* is of the order of the paradox, of the *aporia*, of the double bind (place which is a non-place, non-place which is a place), although, unlike *walten*, it puts into play an indeterminate unconditionality that ends up in practical conditionality marked by certain determinations and disturb all the binary oppositions of anthropo-theological metaphysics (being vs. non-being, *logos* vs. myth, self vs. other, proper vs. improper, matter vs. form, etc.). In this sense, *khôra* is the place of a bifurcation between negative theology and the Greek-Adamic tradition, in which Derrida includes Heidegger in *Faith and knowledge*, and that is marked by "the thought of what (is) beyond being (*epekeina tes ousias*)" (p.33). Derrida's intention is to submit the conceptions of this Greek-Abrahamic tradition to the test of *khôra*:

Khôra, the test of *khôra*, would be, (...), the name of the place, a place name, and a very singular one, for *that* spacing which, not allowing itself to be dominated by any theological, ontological or anthropological level, without age, without history and "older" than all oppositions (for example, sensitive/intelligible), does not even announce itself as "beyond being" according to a negative way (...) It is neither the Being, nor the Good, nor God, nor Man, nor History. It will always resist them, it will always have been (...) the very place of an infinite resistance, of an infinitely impassible resistance: an absolute other without a face (p. 34) [6].

Therefore, the difference discussed here is neither the inverse of identity nor a new ontological principle. It is rather the movement of being different that precedes being itself and that cannot take place in the mode of presence. Thus, the difference, "*prior to arkhé*, is the invisible propeller that places in *khôra* the very existence of *physis* as such" [7]. Moreover, *khôra* displaces the question of genres of being (which refers back to Aristotle's ontological categories) to genres of discourse (in which the deconstruction of ontological sovereignty is placed). *Khôra* would be a third discursive genre, that which is beyond polarities – and especially beyond the polarity between myth and philosophy –; "it would no longer belong to the horizon of sense, nor to that of meaning as the meaning of being" (p. 92); "it anachronizes being" (p. 94) [6].

1 «It ever receives all things into it and has nowhere any form in any wise like to aught of the shapes that enter into it. For it is as the substance wherein all things are naturally moulded, being stirred and informed by the entering shape» (Plato, 2009; p.177).

Conclusion

Khôra receives, so as to give place to them, all the determinations, but she/it does not possess any of them as her/its own. She possesses them, she has them, since she receives them, but she does not possess them as properties. She does not possess anything as her own. She “is” nothing other than the sum or the process of what has just been inscribed “on” her, on the subject of her, on her subject, right up against her subject, but she is not the *subject* or the *present support* of all these interpretations, even though, nevertheless, she is not reducible to them. Simply this excess is nothing, nothing that may be said ontologically (p. 99) [6].

Since the human (as well as the animal) is inscribed in *physis*, it is not inscribed in an ultra-sovereignty, transposed by primordial violence; instead it spreads out in the bottomlessness of *khôra* (where the law of one’s own no longer has any meaning (p. 105)), where ethical possibility is imprinted, the ethicality of ethics², as we said above, where the other no longer has a place determined by his/her supposed nature (p. 105), according to a twilight movement between similarity and dissimilarity (p. 108). Hence, the idea of an ultra-sovereignty is itself conditioned by the unconditionality of *khôra*, it is a differentiation of what differs, trace of the trace, where one can also read the entire context of an epoch (we should remember the figure of the sovereign Evil in Nietzsche, Artaud, Bataille), or, as Derrida says in his book *Khôra*, it is what gives place to all mythical or ontological narratives [6].

This way, Derrida’s movement of de-ontologization

2 *Khôra* is inseparable from an ethics in Plato. Humans should imitate *Khôra*: «but if we imitate what we have called the fostress and nurse of the All, and allow the body, if possible, never to be inactive, but keep it astir and, exciting continual vibrations in it, furnish it with the natural defence against the motions from without and within; and by moderately exercising it bring into orderly relation with each other according to their affinities the affections and particles that are going astray in the body; then, as we have already described in speaking of the universe, we shall not suffer mutually hostile particles to be side by side and to engender discord and disease in the body, but we shall set friend beside friend so as to bring about a healthy state» (Plato, 2009; p.333).

is, differently from how Derrida understands Heidegger, preceded by ethics. We should remember that *khôra* also means receptacle, place of reception and lodging (p. 95) [6]. Heidegger, on the contrary, as we know, does not propose ethics and he seems, according to Derrida, to establish a correlation between human violence and the ultimate meaning of beyond the Being. Our interpretation of Derrida goes in the opposite direction: even if he does not purge the *anthropos* nor the *bios*, the living in general (as becomes evident in his concept of self-immune and in his research on cruelty) of violence, violence is only one possibility among others that are inscribed in *khôra*, which has a much broader meaning than *walten* as a promise of unconditional ethics or hyper-ethics. In this sense and according to Derrida and Levinas, we can say not only that war is not the permanent state of the human, but *also* that every war presupposes and glimpses a state of peace [8-10].

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