

Research Article

Carl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida, Dialogue Tests

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Abstract

Carl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida are rather distant authors. The first is an expression of continental Europe, the second is Franco-Algerian, nourished by Jewish culture. Yet, for example, both take the biblical lesson seriously. Schmitt moves through an articulated discourse, attentive to nuances, exceptions and particularities. Derrida is more inclined, with Nietzsche and, in some ways, with Marx and Freud, to reversals, assonances, paradox. The genesis of Derrida's thought and his work of deconstruction, however, particularly in the ethical field, owe something to Schmitt's conceptualizations. Ultimately, for example, it is precisely the rigid friend/enemy dichotomy, typical of the German jurist's concept of "political", that opens the way to the idea of sexual difference, thanks to the observation that the "friend" or the "enemy", in the feminine, is not mentioned. And the differences between the two authors with respect to the idea of eventuality, of possibility, with respect to "perhaps" and the event are interesting and suggestive. Derrida's is not an unproblematic praise of friendship, but rather a passionate analysis of the scenarios opened up even in the public sphere by that apparently entirely private feeling that is *phil ú*, together with "pure reciprocity and generosity without return", to quote Maurice Blanchot. A definition, linked to the Greek world, ever open, suggestive and ready to welcome others.

Keywords

Friendship, Enemy, Differences, The "Maybe", The Event

1. Introduction

Carl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida are quite distant authors. Expression of continental Europe the former, French-Algerian, nourished by Jewish culture the latter. Yet, for instance, they both take the biblical lesson seriously. Schmitt moves through an articulate discourse, attentive to nuances, exceptions and particularities. Derrida is more inclined, with Nietzsche and, to some extent, with Marx and Freud, to reversals, assonances and paradox. Thus their arguments end up being complementary and complementing each other in a fruitful way. After all, it is precisely the rigid friend/enemy dichotomy, characteristic of the German jurist's concept of the "political", that paves the way for the idea of sexual difference, thanks to

the observation that the "friend" or "enemy", in the feminine, is not mentioned.

Let us try to bring them into dialogue, especially on the ethical level. It often seems to be a dialogue between the deaf; certainly a dialogue starting from an abysmal distance. Yet Schmitt's constructs help us understand the genesis of the deconstruction carried out by Derrida.

2. Enemy, Friend, Responsibility

Towards author such as Thomas Hobbes, there has been

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no shortage of accusations of “crypto-atheism”. Schmitt, on the other hand, takes the *Leviathan* philosopher’s openness to transcendence seriously, very seriously. Memorable in this respect is his Hobbes crystal. In the centre of the graphic representation is the phrase and concept for which «Auctoritas, non veritas, facit legem». At the top, open, precisely, to transcendence, there is the statement *Jesus is the Christ*. Transcendence acquires a name and a face. Not only: from here Schmitt takes the cue to ask himself (and ask) questions. Let us listen: «The question immediately arises as to whether this neutralization» (the relativisation, that is, «of the contrasts proper to religious warfare between Christians» in the name of the common faith in Christ Jesus) «can also be extended [...] to the common faith in God – in which case the first point could also sound: Allah is great –, or even to some of the many truths in need of interpretation, to social ideals, values and supreme principles, from the realisation and implementation of which conflicts and wars originate: for example, freedom, equality and brotherhood; or: man is good; or even: to each according to his needs, etc. etc.» [4]. As John Rawls would say, can the Hobbesian discourse be extended to all “inclusive doctrines”, including those that express a secularisation of theological principles? On the psychological-individual level, probably not, Hobbes would not have gone that far, this is the answer of the German jurist; but, on the level of the horizon he disclosed, the answer is probably a yes. To say that *Jesus is the Christ* may also mean that the divine, transcendence is elsewhere, in another Christ and another Jesus. In short: alongside the “political”, the economic, the moral, aesthetic, in Schmitt there is a dimension of openness to elsewhere. Even to the elsewhere that is in each of us. Another example. There is, for him, the *hostis*, the public, political enemy; there is, however, also the *inimicus*. And, in his interpretation, the evangelical exhortation to love the “enemy” refers precisely to the latter, to the “private” enemy. I can love, here is the gist of his thought, the soldier against whom I fight, the individual soldier, each adversary taken in isolation. He, however, is part of an army or an enemy nation and no good Christian, say, would willingly go along with the advance and victory of an army of Turks. Let us try to grasp the essence of such an idea with other examples. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us not to confuse *conscience* with *responsibility*, which «has an objective primacy [...]. The anxiety to safeguard one’s good conscience, according to the theologian, can be paralysing with respect to action; theologically, then, it represents a form of self-absolution» [2]. Conscience, as is well known, is fundamental in liberal (in the political sense) and Protestant ethics. More: in the ethics of the modern world. Then, however, there is the dimension of responsibility, of “answering to” and, at the same time, of “answering for”. As Jacques Derrida would say, «one says “responding to-”, “responding to-”, “responding before-”. These three modes are not juxtaposable, they envelop and imply each other. *One answers of-*, of oneself or of something (of someone, of an

action, of a thought, of a discourse), *in front of-*, in front of another, a community of others, an institution, a court, a law. And one always responds *of-* (of oneself or of one’s intention, one’s action, one’s discourse), *in front of-*, responding first of all *to-*, since this modality seems more original, more fundamental and therefore unconditional» [1]. But in the face of the imperative of response, for example, for Bonhoeffer the physical elimination of Hitler finds its justification (so much so that the Lutheran theologian conspires to this end). Derrida, on the other hand, following in the footsteps of Emmanuel Levinas, understands responsibility as an open response to many possibilities in the face of the inevitable irruption of the other into our existences, as individuals and as members of groups and societies.

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Perhaps it is in a healthy tension between conscience and responsibility, in all their joints, that a fruitful and rigorous ethical discourse should be situated and developed.

2.1. Schmitt, Derrida and the "Masters of Suspicion"

Let us now turn our attention to another passage on the concept of “political”: «The later 18th century, with the help of the constructions of a deistic philosophy, set metaphysics aside and became vulgarization in grand style, enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), appropriation by common writers of the great achievements of the 17th century, humanisation and rationalisation. It is easy to follow in detail the influence Suarez exerted on countless later popular writings; for some fundamental concepts of morality and state theory, Pufendorf is no more than an epigone of Suarez, and finally Rousseau’s contract social is itself only a vulgarization of Pufendorf» [4]. Francisco Suarez, the Iberian Jesuit who sees in the “contract” held by the people the origin of power and identifies a kind of “right of resistance” on the part of the individual with respect to tyranny; and Samuel Pufendorf, the Protestant scholar who antagonized the German princes by speaking of a *foedus inaequale* at the basis of the Empire and ended up teaching in Lund, Sweden.

And then we come to the 20th century, characterized by the “faith” in technology. «Under the enormous suggestion of ever new, earth-shattering discoveries and achievements, a religion of technical progress arose, for which all other problems solved themselves, precisely by means of technical progress. This faith appeared obvious and self-evident to the great masses of the industrialised countries: they thus skipped all the intermediate stages that are characteristic of the thinking of the leading elites and for them the religion of faith in the miracle and in the afterlife was transformed, without intermediate steps, into a religion of the technical miracle, of human action and the domination of nature». And, here is the point, in «such a way a magical religiosity transcended into an

equally magical technicality»¹.

Faith in scientific progress as a condition for a more general human progress, proper to positivism, thus becomes “faith” in technique. As Emanuele Severino would say, according to a dissimilar and distant perspective, aimed at updating Parmenides’ thought, technique, not faith, moves mountains. Even if it is precisely Severino who sees in the classical Greek idea of *becoming nothing* and *becoming something else* the beginning of the illusion of “technique”. A “becoming”, the latter, distant from the genuinely Heraclitean one, which refers to a more general “unity of opposites”, and close to the version that has come down to us through Cratilo.

It is of great interest to resonate the German Schmitt with the French-Algerian Derrida. An unavoidable premise is that Schmitt’s is an eschatological thought projected onto the present, while Derrida’s is a messianic perspective open to the future. He, particularly in *Politics of Friendship*, uses Nietzsche to emphasise how certain dichotomies, such as “Athens” versus “Jerusalem”, are only provisional paradigms destined to be overcome. If Schmitt grasps in the folds of reality, and of the world, its extreme complexity and articulation, Nietzsche carries out real conceptual *reversals*, apparently acrobatic but destined, in truth, to show a unity and coincidence of opposites that is perhaps even more profound and radical than Heraclitean. Diogenes Laertius’ dying sage is transformed into a living madman, for example. And not to exclaim “friends, there is no friend”, but rather “enemies, there is no enemy”. As if the laboured paths of the Hegelian dialectic were overcome, precisely, by overturning facts, ideas, situations without thereby altering the essence of the matter. Following in this a biblical approach in its own way; that is, arousing scandal and madness. Derrida, not by chance, has a Jewish background, is attentive to Christian thought (to that of Augustine, for example) and, like the wandering Jew, lives at the same time the experience, material and metaphorical, of the “centre” (Paris) and the “margin” (Algiers). Attention, then, to two other “masters of suspicion” of Jewish ancestry, Marx and Freud, so distant from so much of Western culture and, at the same time, so constitutive of it.

Let us pause for a moment precisely on Augustine, in Derrida’s reading, in particular in Book IV of the *Confessions*. He makes his own the Aristotelian definition of friendship: «a soul in two bodies». How is it possible, then, that he survives his friend, if «he is one with the dead man, if their souls are indivisible?» «And the more I was astonished, he who was dead, to continue living, I who was another himself (*ille alter eram*)» [1]. The theologian again: «Hence life was horrifying to me, for I did not want to live in the middle, and therefore perhaps (*forte*) I feared to die, lest he whom I had greatly loved should die altogether»². And that very *perhaps*, in the *Retractions*, allows him to be more merciful with himself. He had probably wished to continue living more for himself than to let the soul of his deceased friend survive in that way, but the explanation given in the *Confessions* of the fear of dying was immediately presented only as a hypothesis. And,

moreover, probably the will to live was *also* linked to the memory of his friend.

2.2. Friendship, "the Politician" After "the Politician", Differences and the Bible

If Schmitt grasps in the friend/enemy distinction, in the possibility, albeit remote, of the physical elimination of the enemy and, therefore, in a sort of primacy of the latter the essence of the “political”, Derrida, once again, operates a conceptual reversal. Not with an approaching eulogy of friendship, but with an impassioned scrutiny of the scenarios opened (or closed) in the public sphere by that apparently entirely private feeling that is *philia*, at once “pure reciprocity and generosity without return”, as Maurice Blanchot puts it. A definition, linked to the Greek world, that is as open, suggestive and ready to welcome others.

What to do with the “political”? There are two possible answers: either to take note that one «can only fight this structure by going beyond the political, the name “politics”, and forging other concepts», «for a different mobilisation», or «to preserve the “old name”, to analyse otherwise the logic and topic of the concept, and to engage in other forms of struggle». But immediately afterwards, the French-Algerian philosopher identifies a third eventuality, and feels it to be his own: «the decision would consist, once again, in relaunching without excluding, in inventing other names and other concepts, in going *beyond this political* without ceasing to intervene to transform it»³.

And herein lies the great theme of sexual difference. Schmitt’s world is entirely masculine; it is a world of men, which excludes the feminine universe. The German jurist does not even pose the question of the friend, or the enemy. A phallogocentric discourse expels women, particularly from the public sphere. Let’s listen to Luce Irigaray for a moment: «Certainly the negative aspect of the death instincts appears evident. But what has been underemphasized, to the point of being blindly contested, is the destructive character present in the life instincts themselves, in that they do not respect the other from themselves, in particular the other of sexual difference. If Freud arrived, at the end of his life, at such a pessimism about the future of culture, if psychoanalysis has produced very problematic effects in private and collective relationships, it is because Freud speaks only of archaic male sexuality, and because limiting oneself to a single pole of sexual difference means limiting oneself to the chaos of primitive desire preceding every human incarnation. Freud’s man resembles the Uranus of Greek mythology, who has no other desire than to practice incest without interruption, does not want offspring to be born from his couplings, and not out of virtue, but out of jealousy, since children would limit the indeterminacy of his power and the boundlessness of his seduction» [3]. It is a more general phenomenon, moreover, not to pose, with regard to friendship, the question of the relationship between man and woman or between woman and

woman. Sexual difference, we would add thanks to Derrida's lesson, as a forerunner of the valorization and promotion of differences, the only sensible and factual accurate way to turn the abstract principle of equality into an event, into historical events.

What about the differences in the biblical message, and the Christian message in particular? Let us dwell for a moment on the Epistle to the Galatians (3: 28-29, New Revised version): «There is neither Jew nor Greek here, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you are Christ's, then you are descendants of Abraham, heirs according to the promise». Here, the differences do not disappear by magic; but *they do become relative*. Differences of lineage, class, sex and gender through Jesus Christ cease to represent a reason for discrimination and injustice and, while they remain, *it is as if* they were no longer there. On closer inspection, this is by no means a tirade against difference, differences, but rather the assurance that, thanks to faith, evil, iniquity, pain and suffering no longer spring from them.

It is here, in this tension, that one can glimpse a motive for further research, between religious belief and history, between politics and friendship.

3. The “Perhaps” and the “Maybe”: Results and Conclusions

Derrida is more inclined to move between the “masters of suspicion”, between Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, between “periphery” and “centre”, in the shadow of the Bible and “Jerusalem”. Schmitt would seem to be more at home in the heart of continental culture (so much so that Derrida, regarding the idea of the State, ends up considering him an epigone of Hegel). Yet he studies Hobbes more than others and does not ignore the biblical lesson for a moment. It is just that his is an articulated discourse, ready to grasp the thousand facets of history and thought, to insinuate itself into them, to move in them. Derrida, on the other hand, prefers “reversal” and paradox; he erects the contradiction, true or apparent, as a rule.

The “perhaps” he notes in Augustine is the hypothesis. The possibility. What could be, here and now. The possible, the possibility, other times indicate, on the other hand, what is not yet, the “potential” (*dýnamis*), as opposed to the “act” (*enérgeia*)⁴. And then there is the maybe of Nietzsche, of Neher,

of Derrida himself, the Jewish maybe: the space that announces the event, that breaks the rigid determinism of facts, that prepares the irruption of something new. A space of freedom.

And the French-Algerian author does not fail to note how the German language (like others) distinguishes between possible and eventual. The possible is the abstract, cold, calculated possibility; the eventual is the possibility that announces itself “in flesh and blood”, as a possible event, perhaps already begun. Schmitt uses *wenigstens eventuell* and *Möglichkeit* as synonyms, but Derrida emphasises and valorises the difference. Schmitt's “sovereign act” tends to be closed, almost concluded, Derrida's “*événement*” is by definition open to the imponderable and to the future. Every event, of course, in order to unfold, needs to consolidate, for an instant or for a long time, thus suspending the uncertainty of the perhaps. Herein lies its *aporia*. Sometimes the event goes on for so long, thus suspending the perhaps for so long, that the latter suffers a kind of oblivion and can only be supposed or imagined. Trying to put the two authors in dialogue, in short, makes it possible to understand them better.

Author Contributions

Danilo Di Matteo is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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1 Ivi, p. 172, my italics.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Ivi, pp. 196-197.

4 Compare Ivi, p. 276.