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Contagion, virology, autoimmunity: Derrida's rhetoric of contamination

Peta Mitchell

Abstract

Threaded through Derrida's body of work is a rhetoric of contamination, one that is intimately bound to the question of metaphor—that is, to the question of language and communication in general. In his reading of Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double in Writing and Difference* (1967), Derrida notes that it is 'metaphor that Artaud wants to destroy'.¹ Metaphor, the manifestation of the schism between words and their referents, and an inescapable reminder of human alienation from the divine, is at the same time a force of contamination. Metaphor is a mark Derrida writes, quoting Artaud, of an 'infection of the human which contaminates ideas that should have remained divine'.² The publication of *Dissemination* a few years later in 1972 saw Derrida concretising the links between contamination and metaphor. There is, as Derrida points out in *Dissemination*, a complex feedback loop between metaphor—the ultimate figure of figurality—and contamination: 'metaphoricity is', he says, 'the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic'.³ In this paper, I map the development and evolution of Derrida's rhetoric of contamination from his increasing deployment of epidemiological tropes (contagion, virology) from the late 1980s to his shift to immunological tropes in a number of his later works in the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, I read Derrida's 'logic of autoimmunity'—a concept that has been considered emblematic of his 'ethical' or 'political' turn—as an extension of rather than a point of rupture from his rhetorical concerns, and one that is undergirded by the principle of contamination.

Paper

If the theme of this special issue conjures up the name of any single philosopher or cultural theorist, it is that of Derrida, who in the early 1990s began to speak and write of a 'logic of autoimmunity' that at once underpins and internally undermines political, legal, and cultural systems such as religion, democracy, and the nation-state. As a biopolitical or biophilosophical concept, autoimmunity attaches itself to Derrida, and yet he is certainly not the only philosopher to invoke discourses either of immunology in general or autoimmunity in particular. Indeed, as Inge Mutsaers explains in her recent book on immunological discourse in political philosophy, the discourse of autoimmunity that has emerged over the past quarter century has now 'firmly taken root in political and cultural philosophy' and can be seen not only in the work of Derrida, but also in that of Roberto Esposito, Jean Baudrillard, and Byung-Chul Han.⁴ Nonetheless, as Mutsaers puts it, among these philosophers, it is Derrida who 'develops autoimmunity into a full political concept'.⁵ The point at which autoimmunity enters Derridean discourse in the early to mid 1990s roughly coincides with what has been taken to be Derrida's ethico-political turn, and indeed

autoimmunity is often treated as a key signifier of a ‘political’ shift in Derrida’s thinking away from his earlier ‘linguistic’ concerns with rhetoric, signification, textuality.

Although many scholars have critiqued this notion of a fundamental shift or rupture in Derrida’s work (a point to which I’ll return) and have similarly claimed that Derrida’s rhetorical concerns are evident in his later ‘ethico-political’ work and vice versa, what I aim to do in this paper is to reveal the tropological line that runs through and connects these concerns. I do this by setting Derrida’s later discourse of autoimmunity in the context of what I am calling his ongoing rhetoric of contamination, which I trace from his early use of metaphors of contamination and contact, through to his later deployment of epidemiological and immunological tropes. In doing this, I wish to draw out the always-already contamination of and by rhetoric exemplified in the biophilosophical concept of autoimmunity, which is often critiqued from *outside* philosophy as a metaphor that has been mis- or poorly re-appropriated from the biomedical domain. Given autoimmunity’s complex relationship to metaphor—its semantic transference back and forth, across and among juridico-political, biomedical, and biophilosophical domains—situating autoimmunity within Derrida’s rhetoric of contamination enables a stronger understanding of the rhetorico-political forces at play in the logic of autoimmunity.

Contaminating rhetoric: contamination and/as metaphor

From the very outset, Derrida’s oeuvre is tainted with, haunted by, contamination’s trace. In the early 1950s, as a second-year student at the École Normale Supérieure, Derrida wrote his first book-length study—a dissertation on Husserl—which remained unpublished until 1990 and which was translated into English in 2003 as *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy*. Although in the body of his dissertation Derrida makes no explicit mention of (the word) contamination, in his preface from 1953/54, the student Derrida remarked on a ‘dissimulated contamination’ that complicates any notion of an absolute or absolutely pure origin or essence.⁶ Looking back on his dissertation in his 1990 preface, Derrida—who, at the time, is on the cusp of his so-called ‘political’ or ‘ethical’ turn—appears to seize upon his earlier, almost castaway references to contamination. While chiding his younger self for the ‘impudence’ of his ‘panoramic’ and ‘scanner’-like reading” of Husserl, Derrida notes that this reading nonetheless uncovers and puts into play a ‘sort of law’ or ‘necessity’, which ‘since then, *even in its literal formulation*, [...] will not have stopped commanding everything I have tried to prove’.⁷ Answering his own posed question of ‘What necessity?’, Derrida continues:

It is always a question of an originary complication of the origin, of an initial contamination of the simple [...] In fact the question that governs the whole trajectory is already: ‘How can the originary of a foundation be an *a priori* synthesis? How can everything start with a complication?’ All the limits on which phenomenological discourse is constructed are examined from the standpoint of the fatal necessity of a ‘contamination’ (‘unperceived entailment or dissimulated contamination’ between the two edges of the opposition: transcendental/‘worldly’, eidetic/empirical, intentional/nonintentional, active/passive, present/nonpresent, pointlike/non-pointlike, originary/derived,

pure/impure, etc.), the quaking of each border coming to propagate itself onto all the others. A law of differential contamination imposes its logic from one end of the book to the other; and I ask myself why the very word ‘contamination’ has not stopped imposing itself on me from thence forward.⁸

Despite the fact that Derrida himself calls attention to his ongoing preoccupation both with the concept and the word *contamination*, surprisingly little has been written that engages directly with the question of contamination in and across Derrida’s work,⁹ and dedicated entries for contamination are noticeably absent from published dictionaries of Derridean terms.¹⁰ By the time Derrida’s dissertation was published in 1990, however, Derrida’s ‘law of differential contamination’ can be detected—both implicitly and explicitly—throughout his early critiques of phenomenology and spilling over into his exploration of the problematics of writing and rhetoric from the mid 1960s. It is here, I argue, that Derrida develops a rhetoric of contamination—one that is indistinguishable from this ‘law’ of contamination; that is figured and enacted through a number of key epidemiological and immunological tropes; and that connects his rhetorical, philosophical, and political concerns.

In Derrida’s early work on Husserl and phenomenology, *contamination* stands in for or takes the space of a word Derrida states he ‘had to give up’, namely *dialectic*.¹¹ As a concept, dialectic cannot adequately address or express the interpenetrating relationship between inside and outside, the failure to keep the origin ‘pure’ from that which would contaminate it. As Christina Howells explains, in his 1967 *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, Derrida is not only concerned with how ‘Husserl has struggled to show the pure, self-present origin to which extraneous elements such as indication, retention and division or absence are retrospectively added’, he also ‘argues for a reversal of priorities’:

The additional or ‘supplementary’ features are in fact nothing of the sort, they are essential to the very constitution that they have been deemed to contaminate. Truth and subjectivity do not exist in a realm prior to language, they depend on language for their very existence. Husserl’s desire to preserve the immediacy of presence has been thwarted by the logic of his own arguments: there is no original presence, only representation; no direct intuition, only mediated knowledge; no pure present moment, only a contamination of past and future; no selfidentity, only irremediable self-division and difference.¹²

As such, as Derrida puts it, contamination denotes ‘the originary “contamination” of the origin’ vis-à-vis phenomenology and indicates the point at which the oppositional logic of dialectic begins to make way for the contaminatory processes of difference, supplement, and trace.¹³ This linguistic-conceptual shift from *dialectic* to *contamination* doubles back on itself to reveal also the contaminatory relationship between word and concept, language and thought. Philosophy must not only contend with an impure origin or essence, it must also contend with the contaminating force of an impure language.

Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*, both published in 1967, the same year as *Voice and Phenomenon*, display a developing rhetoric of contamination. As Derrida argues in “Violence and Metaphysics,” a 1964 essay on Levinas collected

in *Writing and Difference*, phenomenology—and philosophy more broadly—has failed to properly account for language and, specifically, for metaphor. Phenomenological experience cannot be im-mediate or unmediated by language, for the ‘the phenomenon supposes original contamination by the sign’.¹⁴ Levinas’s privileging of the phenomenological ‘face to face’ encounter between self and other ‘without intermediary and without communion, neither mediate nor immediate’, Derrida maintains,

cannot possibly be encompassed by philosophical speech without immediately revealing, by philosophy’s own light, that philosophy’s surface is severely cracked, and that what was taken for its solidity is its rigidity. It could doubtless be shown that it is in the nature of Levinas’s writing, at its decisive moments, to move along these cracks, masterfully progressing by negations, and by negation against negation. Its proper route is not that of an ‘either this ... or that,’ but of a ‘neither this ... nor that’. The poetic force of metaphor is often the trace of this rejected alternative, this wounding of language. Through it, in its opening, experience itself is silently revealed.¹⁵

This question of language, of signification, communication, and contamination is at base a question of metaphor. Indeed, as Derrida is at pains to point out, the word *phenomenon* is shot through with solar metaphors, the philosophy of phenomenology ‘struck with light’,¹⁶ even while it tries to erase, suture over its fundamental metaphoricity via a metaphysics of presence. ‘Empiricism’—and phenomenology as a form of empiricism—is, Derrida writes, ‘thinking *by* metaphor without thinking the metaphor *as such*’.¹⁷

Indeed, for Derrida, this negation and sublimation of metaphor is at the centre of Western philosophy’s quest for an essence via metaphysics, and he explores this question more fully in his 1971 essay “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy”. Philosophy, as metaphysics, Derrida argues, is predicated upon the idea of a knowable truth or essence that may be expressed or ‘got at’ via a direct, literal language. Metaphor—by saying something is what it is not—not only constitutes a ‘detour’ that threatens not to return to the proper, but also takes the form of the *pharmakon*, a dangerous ‘supplementary’ language that contaminates and undermines proper language and reasoning. Metaphysics, according to Derrida is, put simply, just that: a ‘white mythology’ that ‘assembles and reflects Western culture’.¹⁸ This mythology is built upon a central foundational, yet self-effacing metaphor: the metaphor of the sun. Although Western philosophy, as metaphysics, has drawn much of its power from this foundational solar metaphor, to assert itself as logos and reason it must attempt to erase its mythical foundations, ‘erase within itself’, Derrida writes, ‘the fabulous scene that has produced it’.¹⁹ As I have written elsewhere, that “fabulous scene” that lies stirring just beneath philosophy’s surface is figurative language—a supposedly supplementary language, ‘a “detour” or deviance that must be reappropriated by proper or literal language’.²⁰

As Derrida explains in “White Mythology”, philosophy considers metaphor to be ‘a provisional loss of meaning, a form of economy that does no irreparable damage to what is proper, an inevitable detour’, but one that falls ‘within the horizon of a circular reappropriation of the proper sense’.²¹ And yet, metaphor is dangerous to philosophy because it always threatens not to return to the proper: metaphor is both

‘*mimesis* trying its chance, *mimesis* at risk’, always threatening to ‘fail to attain truth’, and as such ‘must reckon with a definite absence’.²² At the same time, the proper—the language of essence—cannot itself be immune to linguistic contamination.²³ Thus, Derrida enjoins us to ‘dismantle’ and ‘reconstitute’ the ‘metaphysical and rhetorical structures’ at work in philosophy so that we may ‘begin to identify the historical terrain—the problematic—in which it has been possible to inquire systematically of philosophy the metaphorical credentials of its concepts’.²⁴ In short, this is the task and purpose of what he calls a ‘general “metaphorology”’.²⁵

By the time Derrida publishes *Dissemination* the following year (1972), the question of metaphor and the question of contamination have been brought into the same frame: ‘metaphoricity’ becomes, as I have quoted above, ‘the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic’.²⁶ In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida had already taken Saussure to task for attempting—not unlike Plato in the *Phaedrus*—to cast writing as ‘the most perfidious, most permanent contamination which has not ceased to menace, even to corrupt’ the ‘purity’ of speech.²⁷ Saussure’s ‘vehement argumentation’ against this supposed ‘contamination by writing’, Derrida continues, ‘aims at more than a theoretical error, more than a moral fault: at a sort of stain and primarily at a sin’.²⁸ In returning to Plato’s speech/writing dichotomy in *Dissemination*, Derrida argues that, like writing, metaphor is portrayed a dangerous supplement, a *pharmakon*, a parasite, a contaminant. It is, as he puts it in a later essay, a ‘bad’ *mimesis* that ‘haunts’ or ‘contaminates’ good *mimesis*.²⁹

Derrida perhaps comes closest to articulating explicitly *why* contamination offers itself as a strategic metaphor *for* metaphor in yet another essay on Levinas, his “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am”, published in 1980. Here, Derrida pronounces that Levinas ‘detests contamination’, and yet ‘what holds his writing in suspense is that one must welcome contamination, the *risk* of contamination’.³⁰ The discourse of contamination that he is ‘enchaining’, Derrida explains some pages later,

Usually [...] implies a stain or poisoning by the contagion of some improper body. Here simple contact suffices, since it will have interrupted the interruption. Contact would be a priori contaminating. Graver yet, the risk of contamination would surface *before* there is contact, in the simple *necessity of tying* together interruptions as such, in the very seriality of traces and the insistence of the ruptures. And even if this unheard-of chain does not retie threads but hiatuses. Contamination then is no longer a risk but a fate that must be assumed. The knots in the series contaminate without contact, as if the two edges re-established continuity at a distance by the simple vis-à-vis of their lines. Still, it is no longer a matter of edges, since there is no longer any line, only tapering points absolutely disjointed from one shore to the other of the interruption.³¹

Contamination, contact, contagion. From this point, the words go hand-in-hand. In “On Reading Heidegger”, an outline of Derrida’s remarks to a 1986 colloquium, he defines contamination as ‘a contagion born of contact and a kind of touching [that] foils every strategy of protection’.³² What ‘scares’ Heidegger, according to Derrida is the ‘contamination between touching and nontouching’, the ‘contamination between touching in the human sense and touching in the nonhuman sense, technical, animal, or whatever’.³³ It is perhaps not surprising that these words begin to constellate

around one another in Derrida's writing of the 1980s. Certainly, the etymology of contamination is not unlike that of contagion. Both words stem from the Latin *tangere*, meaning 'to touch', and both terms carry overtones of tainting, colouring, corruption, infection, or pollution caused by a form of touching together or admixture.³⁴ Moreover, the philological meaning of contamination is highly pertinent to considering Derrida's rhetoric of contamination. In philology the term contamination refers to a 'blending of forms, words, or phrases of similar meaning or use so as to produce a form, word, or phrase of a new type'.³⁵

Contamination, in this sense, is creative, bringing about a new linguistic form through blending. Similarly, in Derrida's formulation, contamination is also not simply destructive; rather, it reveals the workings of *différance*. Contamination, Derrida explains, is not as Heidegger would 'insist [...] merely an "ontic" scheme, a mere "metaphor"', but instead 'requires the thinking of a kind of *différance* that is not yet or no longer ontological difference'.³⁶ Deployed against philosophy's submerged or elided metaphors of enlightenment and purity, contamination exposes the necessary *différance* at its core—contamination conveys, in a single word, the 'menace of supplementarity, parasitism, technique'.³⁷ For Geoffrey Bennington, the 'metonymic contamination' that *différance* engenders is 'not at all an interiority closed in upon itself', but rather an 'opening'.³⁸ The 'necessity of contamination' is an affirmation, it is itself what 'deconstruction affirms, what it says "yes, yes" to'.³⁹ Derrida himself registers the affirmatory nature of contamination in a 1994 interview, published as "Nietzsche and the Machine". 'One should not', Derrida states in this interview, 'simply consider contamination as a threat'. Contamination must always be 'assumed' and 'affirmed' not only because 'it is also opening or chance, our chance' but also because 'it is the very possibility of affirmation in the first place'.⁴⁰ 'So you see', Derrida concludes, 'in fact, nothing can be simple, and contamination is a good thing!'.⁴¹

By the late 1980s, Derrida's rhetoric of contamination has encompassed not only contagion and parasitism, but also virality and infection. Rhetoric itself, Derrida argues (perhaps tellingly, in a supplementary note) is 'a parasitic or viral structure: in its origins and in general'.⁴² Invoking computer viruses and AIDS, he asks, 'Whether viewed from up close or from far away, does not everything that comes to affect the proper have the form of a virus (neither alive nor dead, neither human nor "reappropriable by the proper of man," nor generally subjectivable)? And doesn't rhetoric always obey a logic of parasitism? Or rather, doesn't the parasite logically and normally disrupt logic?'.⁴³ In an interview the following year titled "The Spatial Arts", Derrida draws virality even more strongly into the foreground of his rhetoric of contamination. Again referencing the 'intersection between AIDS and the computer virus', Derrida argues that

All I have done, to summarize it very reductively, is dominated by the thought of a virus, what could be called a parasitology, a virology, the virus being many things. [...] The virus is in part a parasite that destroys, that introduces disorder into communication. Even from the biological standpoint, this is what happens with a virus; it derails a mechanism of the communicational type, its coding and decoding. On the other hand, it is something that is neither living nor nonliving; the virus is not a microbe. And if you follow these two threads, that of a parasite which disrupts destination from the communicative point of

view—disrupting writing, inscription, and the coding and decoding of inscription—and which on the other hand is neither alive nor dead, you have the matrix of all that I have done since I began writing.⁴⁴

This accretion of contagious and contaminatory metaphors in Derridean discourse goes beyond, as I have argued elsewhere, ‘mere’ metaphor. For Derrida, ‘the viral rhetoric of the network age has exploded the possibility of any neat separation between the metaphorical and the proper’, making the question of metaphor ever more relevant.⁴⁵

Contamination, the law, and violence: towards a law of contamination

By the late 1970s, contamination had, for Derrida, hardened into a ‘law’ as well as into a conceptual apparatus for understanding the problem of law itself. The ‘law of differential contamination’ that Derrida, in 1990, identifies in his dissertation on Husserl, appears also in his 1977 essay “Limited Inc a b c”, in which he refers to ‘a law of undecidable contamination, which has interested me for some time’.⁴⁶ In “The Law of Genre”, first published in 1980, Derrida turns his attention to the ways in which genre—both in its literary and broader classificatory senses—inscribes a particular law that, while attempting to quarantine itself from impurity or mixture, is founded upon a principle of contamination. ‘[A]s soon as genre announces itself’, Derrida writes, ‘one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity’.⁴⁷ And yet, he asks,

What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the *a priori* of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason?⁴⁸

Genre’s boundaries are continually and always-already pervaded by external ‘disruptive “anomalies”’, such as repetition, citation, and re-citation—a disruption for which Derrida provides a number of alternative names: ‘impurity, corruption, contamination, decomposition, perversion, deformation, even cancerization, generous proliferation, or degeneration’.⁴⁹ Yet again, however, contamination remains the privileged term. If the law of genre were itself governed by a law, Derrida concludes, this ‘law of the law of genre’ would be ‘precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy’.⁵⁰

Where Derrida engages most directly with law and with the law of contamination, however, is in his monumental essay of 1989, “Force of Law”, which was originally presented as a seminar at the Cardozo Law School. It is here that we see the rhetoric of contamination entering into and engaging with legal discourse. In “Force of Law”, Derrida takes up the question of Law’s purity and autonomy—what he calls the “mystical foundation” of authority’, approaching the question via Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence”. If we were to identify the single most influential foundational, yet self-effacing, metaphor for Law, it must be Hans Kelsen’s notion of a closed system of ‘pure’ law. In his *Pure Theory of Law*, first published in German in 1934, Kelsen sought to carve out a defined, autonomous space for Law by separating it from contaminating external influences, such as psychology, sociology, ethics, and political

theory, and by positing a *grundnorm*, or basic norm, upon which all other norms might be founded. It would be convenient if Kelsen had used the term ‘contaminating’—as I just did—to describe the outside influences affecting the purity and autonomy of Law’s borders, but I should be careful to point out he did not. Kelsen does not dwell on the context and philosophical background for his Pure Theory, which is confined to one paragraph at the text’s outset in which he rails against the way in which law has been ‘adulterated’ through its ‘uncritical mixing’ with other disciplines.⁵¹ The original German terms Kelsen uses to describe the ‘adulteration’ of Law by other disciplines stem from the word *vermengung*, which translates as ‘mixing’. Kelsen notably does not use terms such as the German *kontamination* or *verunreinigung*, meaning pollution or contamination, and yet *vermengung* does retain that particular philological sense of *contamination*—of linguistic blending—pointed out earlier.

Unlike and against Kelsen, who posits the legal fiction of the *grundnorm* in order to provide a cornerstone for Law’s authority and autonomy, Derrida argues that law’s authority is built upon the act of sovereign violence—an act that at once founds law and conserves it, an act that is both originary and conservatory in its endless iterability, and one that cannot be reduced to a norm. There is, he maintains, ‘no more a pure foundation or a pure position of law, and so a pure founding violence, than there is a purely conservative violence’.⁵² In place of a norm, then, can only be found what Derrida calls ‘a *différentielle* contamination’ between law’s creation and conservation, ‘with all the paradoxes that this may lead to’.⁵³ This, too, is connected with Derrida’s theory of language, and particularly figurative language. As Petra Gehring has pointed out, in “Force of Law”, Derrida maintains that

if the pure means disavows itself in language, which cannot deny its ‘mystical foundation,’ then the hope of a breach with the ‘mystical foundation of the authority’ of law is also disavowed. [...] Law admits no pure solutions, no good decisions, and in this sense it must admit to being violent just as, according to Derrida, language—everything in which mediation is somehow at work—is necessarily ‘contaminated’.⁵⁴

As such, Derridean contamination must deny or at the very least problematise the kind of autonomy posited for law both by Kelsen’s purity thesis and also, more recently by Niklas Luhmann and Gunther Teubner’s autopoietic theories of law.⁵⁵ Margaret Davies has, in some detail, discussed the ways in which Derrida’s law of impurity or contamination complexifies and is complexified by Kelsen’s pure theory of law. If, she says, we take the basic norm not simply to be the ‘foundation for the legal system, but rather a rupture or limit which makes the legal system possible’, Kelsen’s purity thesis, which is ‘wholly reliant on self-legitimation through *exclusion* of an other, at this point *becomes* the other: the inside and the outside are undecidable, and we have a limit of impurity’.⁵⁶ Impurity becomes, according to Davies a law in itself: it marks every law with its stain and becomes the very ‘condition for the claim of purity’.⁵⁷

The law of contamination and the logic of autoimmunity

In Derrida’s later work, his law of contamination or impurity—with its attendant metaphors of contagion, infection, and virology—begins to make way for a logic of

autoimmunity, and as I established at the outset of this essay, Derrida's shift towards immunological tropes in the 1990s are often considered a primary marker of his ethico-political turn. Of course, Derrida himself rejected suggestions that his work could be divided up, parceled out into neat, well-bounded categories, 'shifts', or 'turns', for this drive to classify, categorise, and draw boundaries must, like any other, be subject to the same principle of contamination that underpins the deconstructive endeavour. Although, as Maebh Long has put it, this 'contamination' within and among the phases of Derrida's writing needs to be acknowledged, an ethico-political 'shift in Derrida's texts is nonetheless generally recognised', a shift that is in many respects marked by the entrance of autoimmunity.⁵⁸

In mapping out the emergence of Derrida's concept of autoimmunity, Elizabeth Rottenberg notes that a 'general logic of "autoimmunity"' can be traced to his 1996 essay "Faith and Knowledge", even though the term *autoimmunity* appears in Derrida's writing for the first time some years earlier in *Specters of Marx* (1993) and *Politics of Friendship* (1994).⁵⁹ In *Specters*, Derrida invokes the law of contamination when he describes 'the essential contamination of spirit (*Geist*) by specter (*Gespenst*)' and later employs *contamination* as a by-word for haunting of and by the other.⁶⁰ Derrida's reference to autoimmunity in *Specters* is equally brief, but nonetheless is framed in terms strongly reminiscent of his earlier rhetoric of contamination and suggestive of the ways his future interest in autoimmunity will develop. 'The living ego', Derrida writes in *Specters*, 'is auto-immune':

To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself it is necessarily led to welcome the other within (so many figures of death: differance of the technical apparatus, iterability, non-uniqueness, prosthesis, synthetic image, simulacrum, all of which begins with language, before language), it must therefore take the immune defenses apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once *for itself and against itself*.⁶¹

Autoimmunity seems here to take Derrida's logic of contamination one step further. Where to this point Derrida has deployed a rhetoric of contamination in order to maintain that an essence cannot remain pure and untainted by that which it would define as impure or exterior to it (that is, the self or essence is always-already contaminated by the other), autoimmunity suggests the contamination of the self by the self *as* other, such that self and non-self can no longer simply be recognized. A few years later, Derrida would make autoimmunity a guiding motif in his analysis of religion in the essay "Faith and Knowledge". Here Derrida declares a 'general logic of auto-immunization' that he would extend further in the context of terrorism in his 2001 interview "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides" and further again in the context of sovereignty and the nation-state in *Rogues*, published in 2003.

Viewed in this way, there is an apparent—if apparently superficial—shift to the political in the linear-temporal mapping that I have performed: from philosophical to rhetorical concerns and thence to law and religion, and on to terror, sovereignty, and the nation-state. In her essay on autoimmunity, Long describes the lengths to which Derrida went in order to articulate, retrospectively, the continuity of the political throughout his writing, to smooth over what had been portrayed as a rupture in his *oeuvre*. Rather than existing as self-contained systems laid out along a developmental

line of progress, Derrida's texts, according to Long 'operate in ironic, aphoristic relation to each other, each a foreword and an epilogue to another, each a reengagement and a rewriting, independent and conjoined. Each text is in counterpoint with every other text, in time and out of time. Each new text changes every other text, always a preface to a further fragment'.⁶² This observation presupposes also a double-movement—just as Derrida's seemingly non- or pre-political works can be seen to be contaminated with the same preoccupations as his 'political' ones, so too can his 'political' works be seen to be contaminated with the same concerns as his philosophical and rhetorical ones. And this double movement is nowhere more apparent than in the figure of autoimmunity, which raises again questions of rhetoric and metaphor.

In their recent work of medical history, *Intolerant Bodies: A Short History of Autoimmunity*, Warwick Anderson and Ian R. Mackay are mildly disparaging of Derrida's philosophical cooptation of the biomedical term *autoimmunity*. Derrida, portrayed as a 'roguish' philosopher with 'admirers' rather than interlocutors, is described as 'discover[ing] autoimmunity in the early 1990s' and becoming 'obsessed' with it, notwithstanding the at-times 'eccentric' nature of his 'understanding of autoimmune pathology'.⁶³ A hint of equivocation also attends their assessment of philosophers, such as Derrida and Roberto Esposito, who have been 'gripped' by the 'allure' of autoimmunity: 'Their history may be unreliable, their findings belated', Anderson and Mackay write, 'but one has to admire the fervor that infuses their proclamation of the significance of immunity for our discernment of self and other, for our appreciation of security and danger, for the understanding of life and its contrary. In the twenty-first century, immunology—autoimmunity especially—seems applicable everywhere'.⁶⁴ One senses that, although autoimmunity 'seems applicable everywhere', Anderson and Mackay would prefer that it did not, or that at least it was not 'deploy[ed] with abandon' in Derridean fashion.⁶⁵ What appears to make Anderson and Mackay uncomfortable is the trafficking of metaphors across and between the domains of science and philosophy, and to be fair, their concern goes in both directions. They acknowledge immunity's origins in the social domain—a point that I will return to—and that philosophy's adoption of autoimmunity represented, in some respects, immunity's 'returning [...] from whence it came'.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, they raise concerns about the potential for conceptual contamination and corruption *in both directions* as a result of 'metaphoric borrowing'.⁶⁷

In "Faith and Knowledge", Derrida calls attention to immunity's grounding in the juridico-political realm. In Roman society, to be *immunis* meant to be exempt from service (*munis*) and from the charges, taxes, or obligations (*munera*) rendered to benefit the *communis* or community. As Derrida notes, this concept of immunity as a 'freedom' or 'exception' from service or obligation 'was subsequently transported into the domains of constitutional or international law (parliamentary or diplomatic immunity), but it also belongs to the history of the Christian Church and to canon law'.⁶⁸ In *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body*, Ed Cohen provides a detailed and insightful overview of immunity's etymology and history as a concept, pointedly noting that the 'legal concept [of immunity] predates its biomedical appropriation by at least two thousand years'.⁶⁹ Science's metaphorisation of immunity must be taken seriously, Cohen argues, because 'we need to appreciate much more palpably the imaginary work that

metaphor performs in and as science⁷⁰—or, in Derridean terms, we need to acknowledge the ‘fabulous scene’ that underpins science as well as philosophy. Additionally, as Michael M. J. Fischer has cautioned, we need to better understand how metaphorical usages within science writing are not simply fixed, dead metaphors, or ‘premature closures’ of meaning. Rather, Fischer maintains, metaphors in the body of science are ‘pointers to fields of difference or terms within a series or cascade of signifiers. Science never stops its mapping, its drilling down, and as knowledge changes, so too do high-level metaphors’.⁷¹

In consciously engaging with the question of metaphor and scientificity, Derrida, according to Cohen, ‘proposes a new interplay between epistemological and metaphorical effects by reanimating the living metaphor in bioscience’.⁷² Philosophy’s appropriation of immunity is, therefore, a reappropriation; it is not simply a metaphorisation, but a remetaphorisation, resulting in what might be thought of as a ‘biopolitical hybrid’.⁷³ W. J. T. Mitchell makes a similar point in his essay on Derrida’s application of autoimmune logic to terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11. ‘The whole theory of the immune system and the discipline of immunology’, Mitchell writes,

is riddled with images drawn from the sociopolitical sphere—of invaders and defenders, hosts and parasites, natives and aliens, and of borders and identities that must be maintained. In asking us to see terror as autoimmunity, then, Derrida is bringing the metaphor home at the same time he sends it abroad, stretching it to the limits of the world. The effect of the bipolar image, then, is to produce a situation in which there is *no literal meaning*, nothing but the resonances between two images, one bio-medical, the other political.⁷⁴

Immunity therefore has a semantic porosity—one that is mirrored in the body its biomedical sense assumes. As Michael Lewis explains, although the immune system establishes a boundary between the self and non-self in order to ‘protect the identity of the vital substance’, it is a permeable and ‘porous and shifting’ boundary that must allow ‘a certain measure of alterity (otherness) [to be] incorporated into the very identity (sameness) of the organism and installed as an essential part of the protective apparatus itself, as if one could not protect the identity of the self without incorporating a measure of otherness within it’.⁷⁵ Immunity’s slippage back and forth across domains, its assumption of porous and fundamentally permeable boundaries, and its necessary confusion of self and other presuppose both a rhetoric *and* a logic of contamination.

Autoimmunity further complicates this by introducing into the equation a perverse—in Derrida’s terms ‘quasi-suicidal’⁷⁶—drive, one that ‘amounts to the self’s attacking its own organs, tissues and processes, including the very immune system which was to have protected it and its identity’.⁷⁷ As Derrida explains in “Faith and Knowledge”, any attempt to essentialise, to delimit and isolate an essence in its purity (whether it be religion, law, or philosophy) is thwarted by its predicates or supplements, which cannot simply be hived off. In any given case, he explains, ‘there are at least *two* families, two strata or sources that overlap, mingle, contaminate each another without ever merging; and just in case things are still too simple, one of the two is precisely the drive to remain unscathed, on the part of that which is allergic to contamination, *save by itself, auto-immunely*’.⁷⁸ In other words, what autoimmunity serves to

thematise is the drive that always-already and perversely counters *from within* the overlapping drive to remain uncontaminated, unscathed, *heilig*. Autoimmunity in this sense, then, reveals itself as the limit of the law of contamination—indeed as the contamination of contamination.

Notes

¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 232.

² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 232.

³ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 149.

⁴ Mutsaers, 95.

⁵ Mutsaers, 96.

⁶ Derrida, *Problem*, xl.

⁷ Derrida, *Problem*, xiv, *emph.* in original.

⁸ Derrida, *Problem*, xv. With his reference to ‘unperceived entailment or dissimulated contamination’, Derrida is quoting from the preface of his original dissertation.

⁹ Arkady Plotnitsky’s essay on the violence presupposed by Derridean contamination, along with Douglas L. Donkel’s examination of the relationship between *différance* and contamination, Andrew Mitchell’s investigation of Derrida’s concept of contamination in relation to Heidegger, and Beata Stawarska’s reading of Derrida and Saussure on contamination and entrainment are notable exceptions.

¹⁰ See Niall Lucy’s *A Derrida Dictionary*, Simon Morgan Wortham’s *The Derrida Dictionary*, and Maria-Daniella Dick and Julian Wolfreys’s *Derrida Wordbook*. Although none of these texts provides a dedicated entry for “contamination,” the word does, however, appear a number of times in each, and, in the *Derrida Wordbook*, most notably in the entry devoted to “Virus.”

¹¹ Derrida, *Problem*, xv.

¹² Howells, 38.

¹³ Derrida, *Problem*, xv. See also Leonard Lawlor, who notes that the word ‘dialectic’ is ‘virtually absent in Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics” [...] and in *Voice and Phenomenon*, and, by the time of “The Ends of Man” in 1968, it will have completely disappeared from Derrida’s lexicon of positive terms. Instead, the words “undecidability”, “contamination”, and, of course, “*différance*” will replace it’. Lawlor, 140.

¹⁴ Derrida, “Violence”, 161.

¹⁵ Derrida, “Violence”, 112.

¹⁶ Derrida, “Violence”, 104. The word *phenomenology*, as John McCumber explains, is ‘composed of two Greek words “phenomenon” and “logos” [...] The Greek *phainomenon*, for its part, has a good deal of structure: it is the present neuter middle participle of *phainein*, meaning to shine, show or bring to light. In the middle voice, this means to bring oneself to light, or to show oneself; and as a neuter participle, it refers to the action of doing this on the part of a thing. A “phenomenon” is thus something that brings itself to light as a thing’. McCumber, 162.

¹⁷ Derrida, “Violence”, 174.

¹⁸ Derrida, “White Mythology”, 11.

¹⁹ Derrida, “White Mythology”, 11.

²⁰ P. Mitchell, *Cartographic Strategies*, 11.

²¹ Derrida, “White Mythology”, 73.

²² Derrida, “White Mythology”, 42.

²³ Derrida, “White Mythology”, 48.

- ²⁴ Derrida, “White Mythology”, 13.
- ²⁵ Derrida, “White Mythology”, 18.
- ²⁶ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 149.
- ²⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 34.
- ²⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 34.
- ²⁹ Derrida, “Rhetoric of Drugs”, 7.
- ³⁰ Derrida, “At This Very Moment”, 162.
- ³¹ Derrida, “At This Very Moment”, 167.
- ³² Derrida, “On Reading”, 171.
- ³³ Derrida, “On Reading”, 177–178, *emph. in original*.
- ³⁴ See also Derrida’s *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, first published in 2000, in which he explores the relationship between contamination, contact, and the figure of touch. Derrida, *On Touching*, 75, 109.
- ³⁵ “Contamination,” s.v. d. *Philology*.
- ³⁶ Derrida, “On Reading”, 172.
- ³⁷ Derrida, “On Reading”, 171.
- ³⁸ Bennington and Derrida, 73–74.
- ³⁹ Bennington and Derrida, 310.
- ⁴⁰ Derrida, “Nietzsche and the Machine”, 56.
- ⁴¹ Derrida, “Nietzsche and the Machine”, 64.
- ⁴² Derrida, “Rhetoric of Drugs”, 23.
- ⁴³ Derrida, “Rhetoric of Drugs”, 23.
- ⁴⁴ Derrida, “The Spatial Arts”, 12.
- ⁴⁵ P. Mitchell, *Contagious Metaphor*, 139.
- ⁴⁶ Derrida, “Limited Inc”, 59.
- ⁴⁷ Derrida, “Law of Genre”, 57.
- ⁴⁸ Derrida, “Law of Genre”, 57.
- ⁴⁹ Derrida, “Law of Genre”, 57–58. See also “Limited Inc”, in which Derrida also discusses repetition and iterability in terms of a process of contamination and a parasitic logic that ceaselessly undermines essentialising thought: ‘Iterability blurs a priori the dividing-line that passes between [...] opposed terms, “corrupting” it if you like, contaminating it parasitically, qua limit. What is re-markable about the mark includes the margin within the mark. The line delineating the margin can therefore never be determined rigorously, it is never pure and simple’. “Limited Inc”, 70. Similarly, in a 1989 interview published as “This Strange Institution Called Literature”, Derrida explains that in the formation of an event, ‘What happens is always some contamination. The uniqueness of the event is this coming about of a singular relation between the unique and its repetition, its iterability. The event comes about, or promises itself initially, only by thus compromising itself by the singular contamination of the singular and what shares it. It comes about as impurity—and impurity here is chance’. Derrida, “This Strange Institution”, 68–69.
- ⁵⁰ Derrida, “Law of Genre”, 59.
- ⁵¹ Kelsen, 1.
- ⁵² Derrida, “Force of Law”, 997.
- ⁵³ Derrida, “Force of Law”, 997.
- ⁵⁴ Derrida, “Force of Law”, 159.

- ⁵⁵ See, for instance, Teubner's edited collection *Autopoietic Law* (1987), which contains Luhmann's essay "The Unity of the Legal System", and Luhmann's *Law as a Social System* (trans. of *Das Recht der Gesellschaft*, 1993).
- ⁵⁶ Davies, 221.
- ⁵⁷ Davies, 221.
- ⁵⁸ Long, 106.
- ⁵⁹ Rottenberg, 3.
- ⁶⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 141, 201.
- ⁶¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 177, *emph.* in original.
- ⁶² Long, 107.
- ⁶³ Anderson and Mackay, 149–150.
- ⁶⁴ Anderson and Mackay, 149–150.
- ⁶⁵ Anderson and Mackay, 146.
- ⁶⁶ Anderson and Mackay, 144.
- ⁶⁷ Anderson and Mackay, 145.
- ⁶⁸ Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge", 80, n. 27.
- ⁶⁹ Cohen, 35.
- ⁷⁰ Cohen, 36.
- ⁷¹ Fischer, 149–50. Fischer does, however, suggest that the 'self–nonself' metaphor that accompanied and subtended the biomedical concept of autoimmunity has, within scientific writing 'run its course. Fischer 149–150.
- ⁷² Cohen, 36–37.
- ⁷³ Cohen, 38, 40.
- ⁷⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, 282.
- ⁷⁵ Lewis, 215.
- ⁷⁶ Derrida "Autoimmunity", 124.
- ⁷⁷ Lewis, 216.
- ⁷⁸ Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge", 63, *emph.* in original.

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