

SINGULARITY, INDIVIDUALITY AND THE DELIMITATION OF LIFE¹

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1. One of the major concerns of my work over the past few decades has to do with rethinking the notion of “singularity” in relation to generality or “universality”. I am far more comfortable with the first term, “generality” than I am with the second: to determine anything as “universal” seems to me to presuppose a knowledge that no finite human being can have or should aspire to having. We are all limited by our bodily existence to a limited position in time and space, whereas “universality” presupposes a position that somehow transcends such limitations. It is therefore more than human and in some areas of the world has always been ascribed to the “divine” – whether as a monotheological Creator-God, or as a plurality of gods –, or, in a more secular manner, to “ideas” or “values” held to transcend any particular cultural, historical, social, political or economic limitation. In an increasingly “globalized” world, the temptation to think in terms of universality is in some ways increased, and this can, I think, have very dangerous implications.

2. Let me try to sum up some of the main theoretical points involved in the project I have been working on. The first has to do with the notion of the “singular”. In English, as in French and German, and I suspect many other Indo-European languages, we are confronted with a paradox and a problem. The problem is that the word “singular” is often used as though it were synonymous with “individual”. But other common uses of the word show us that this is not at all true. I first became aware of some of these other uses in reading Jacques Lacan, namely his well-known Seminar on Poe’s story, “The Purloined Letter”. Lacan reads Poe’s story as a dramatization of the theory of the “symbolic” and the “signifier” that he was developing at the time: the stolen letter, that is there for all to see and is thus virtually invisible, becomes an exemplification of the signifier, which is also there for all to see and yet precisely, qua signifier, eludes any simple comprehension or grasp. Here is what Lacan writes (in my translation): “Here then we have something simple and odd, as it is announced on the very first pages (of the story), reduced to its simplest expression, the singularity of the letter, which, as the title indicates, is the true subject of the story...”² At the time,

1 The thoughts discussed in the article are developed at greater length in a book to appear in Spring 2021 at the University of Minnesota Press: Samuel Weber, *Singularity: Politics and Poetics*.

2 J. Lacan, *Écrits I*, 40.

I could not help but be struck by the connection Lacan drew out of Poe's narrative between "the singularity of the letter", and its quality of being both "simple and odd". One might easily consider the singular to be "simple", but not necessarily "simple and odd". And yet, "oddness" is precisely one of the meanings of "singularity" and that distinguishes it radically from the notion of the "individual". The individual, whether as noun or as adjectival quality, is generally not considered to be the equivalent of being "odd". And yet is precisely one of the semantic valences that indicates why "the singular" should never simply be equated with "the individual".

3. In French, the word for "odd" is "impair", which could also be translated more literally as "unequal". I take this meaning of "singular" to be decisive, first in demarcating it from the tendency to equate it with "individual", and second, in problematizing its relation to itself, and to the notion of identity and selfhood in general. The "singular" is odd, "impair", unequal not only to others but to itself. In this sense, I take issue with the definition that Lacan gives of it in his Seminar on the Purloined Letter: "If we have above all insisted on the materiality of the signifier, (it is because) this materiality is *singular* in many points, of which the primary one is that it does not support division (*partition*)".³ To the traditional notion of the signifier, which for Saussure is defined by its purely differential character – i.e. not through what it represents but through its distinctions from other signifiers – Lacan here adds its *material* quality, which however he defines as essentially singular. But among the many aspects of singularity, the one he emphasizes in the passage quoted is its indivisibility: it cannot be divided or, to use the French word, partitioned. At the same time, in this article as elsewhere, Lacan emphasizes the process of repetition as that through which signifiers function. How can the signifier, then, be both singular and yet essentially constituted through repetition? The question is one that Walter Benjamin addressed in his 1924 "Epistemo-critical Preface" to his study of *The Origins of the German Mourning Play* (Trauerspiel). Benjamin insisted that the notion of "origin" had to be understood historically rather than logically, and here is how he construed its structure:

Origin does not, therefore, emerge out of factual findings (*aus dem tatsächlichen Befunde*), but rather touches on their pre- and post-history. The guidelines of a philosophical consideration are inscribed in the dialectic that accompanies origin. From it singularity and repetition (*Einmaligkeit und Wiederholung*) reveal themselves to be essentially interdependent.⁴

3 *Ibid.*, 33.

4 W. Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*, 30; *Origin*, 46.

Benjamin's notion of origin, like Lacan's signifier, is thus irreducibly singular; and yet this singularity does not enclose it in its immediate or actual manifestation or existence. Rather, what I have just referred to as its "actual manifestation" – what Benjamin calls "factual findings" – is in turn only accessible in its "pre- and post-history", which is to say, through repetition. But it is a form of repetition that, as Kierkegaard writes in his book of that name, combines identity with difference: it must be recognizable as the "same", but this sameness includes its difference from that to which it is being compared. Singularity, then, which seems simple enough if we think of it only as "the unique", much less as the "individual", is in this account intrinsically split – split off from itself by being accessible not directly but only through a certain repetition that at the same time changes it while reproducing it. Thus, what is absolutely unique and singular is precisely never "absolute" in the literal sense: it is always tied to a network of repetitions, both past and future.

4. It is Jacques Derrida who, to my knowledge, has conceptualized this paradoxical situation most radically. For it is a paradox, even if both Kierkegaard and Benjamin use the word "dialectic" to describe it. Their dialectic however is closer to the Kantian notion than to the Hegelian, for it does not produce a greater, more comprehensive unity. Derrida sought to think this using the notion of "iterability", which he develops for the first time in his essay, "Limited Inc.", and to which he returns throughout his subsequent writings. Iterability for Derrida designates the possibility of being repeated as both the same and other; it is required in every process of recognition or identification, and this makes it prior to the Saussurean notion of "difference" (much less that of "opposition"). This is one reason why Derrida prefers to write of "marks" rather than of "signifiers": for the materiality of the signifier, for him, is not limited to what is called language, be it speech or writing. In order for any "mark" to function, it must be "re-marked" and this re-marking inserts every mark in a process of iterability that never comes full circle. This is why it is misleading to insist, as Lacan does, that the material singularity of the signifier is defined above all by the fact that it does not "suffer being partitioned". For this is only the one side of the coin, and singularity, like a coin, has at least two sides. The other side is that its uniqueness can only be experienced through a certain partitioning or as we have seen, repetition: hence, as an absence, loss, memory or intimation of something radically other, but never as anything that is immediately present. Paradoxically it is the fact that the singular is never directly accessible as such that renders it irreducible to the notion of object, much less that of an object of cognition.

5. And yet, the singular can only be accessed and experienced through its negative relation – or more precisely, through its *resistance* – to what is knowable. This however places it in an

inexpungable relation to the knowable. It consists not in the negation of what has been or can be known, but in a certain exceeding of its limits, as a kind of negative excess that is experienced as feeling. Feelings of the resistance of the singular can take different forms: love, hate, hope, despair etc. But whatever their form, they do not involve either the simple negation of knowledge nor its simple surpassing. It returns “knowledge” to the physicality that is its condition. I prefer physicality here to materiality, because corporeality always involves a distinct and singular positionality, which is its condition but to which it can never be reduced. And in turn, the singular is always situated, but its situation can never be exhaustively described or determined. A singular event, for instance, never involves an absolute break with the past – in the sense of annulling all relation to it – but rather its radical alteration and transformation. The attacks of September 11th, 2001, did not, according to Derrida, constitute an “event” in the strict sense, because they were predictable, and therefore did not mark a radical break with the past.⁵ Alteration and transformation are not identical, for not every change involves the constitution of something essentially new. But in any experience of radical singularity, alteration inevitably implies a kind of entropy: the singular must depart from itself in order to appear or take place, but in so doing it ceases to be authentically singular. The singular must necessarily divide itself in order to be, but what it then comes in no longer purely singular. It is constitutively divisible, and yet irreducible to any of its divisions.

6. There are two primary ways however in which cognition, which implies a certain generality, seeks to appropriate the singular: either as the particular individual or as the generalized singular. These are two aspects of the same scheme, but they can have very different effects. The “generalized singular” (as Derrida calls it, in “The Animal who I am / whom I follow”, “L’animal que donc je suis...”) – (the generalized singular) is surely the most pernicious of the two forms of appropriation, because while it retains the grammatical form of singularity, it eliminates its distinctive differences by extending it immediately to designate an entire genus or group. It provides the matrix of racisms of all sorts: The noun, “Jew”, for instance, as opposed to the adjective, *Jewish*; “Naming,” Nietzsche once observed, is “*Herrenrecht*”: the prerogative of the Masters. In Genesis, the Creator God calls upon Adam to name all living creatures⁶ but also “to have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth”.⁷ It is of the nature of language that names are never entirely proper, never entirely singular: like all linguistic entities they designate not individuals but groups; and according to the King James Version, at least, this is

5 J. Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, 53, 62, and passim.

6 Gen. 2: 19.

7 Gen. 1: 28.

consonant with the fact that the Universal Creator-God created all living beings “after their kind”, i.e. generically.⁸ This tendency to generalization that is intrinsic to language allows for the misuse of so-called proper names to designate not simply persons in the singular, but persons qua members of a group: beginning in 1939 “Sarah” and “Israel” were the names that the Nazis forced Jews to use in official documents to make them recognizable as Jews. The use of the definite article “the” can also function to establish a collective – national or ethnic – identification: *The American*, *The German*, *The Chinese* etc. Instead of respecting the distinctive *heterogeneity* of singularity, the latter is transformed into the basis for the identification of a collective that subsumes differences under a normative *homogeneity*.

7. The second form from which the singular in the strict sense should be distinguished is the one I started out by mentioning namely “the individual”. “The individual” uses the definite article once again to define the essential indivisibility and homogeneity of individuality. Qua indivisible, “the individual” can be considered to compose the constitutive element of society, and the source of all value and wealth. If it is individual, this individual must also be thought of as self-contained and self-referential. This means that its privileged expression is the first person singular, “I”, since the utterance of this word implies precisely a certain self-reference. Since however there are many individuals in a society, and since they are manifestly unequal in all sorts of ways, “the individual” tends to acknowledge its relation to others first as only to other individuals – alter egos – and second, as a necessarily agonistic one. The highly touted and globalized value of “excellence” has become the name for the criterion used in the allocation of resources – in Germany one speaks of Exzellenz-Universitäten to designate superior research universities which receive preferential funding from the State. But to ex-cell is merely to go “further” than others, without any room being left to evaluate the particular directions being taken. Uniformity here is the corollary of homogeneity: to ex-cel is to be better than one’s competitors. “Many are called, few are chosen”, is one of the classical formulations for the Elect in Protestantism (see Matthew Arnold). The name of the newly elected U.S. President sums up this agonistic ethic: “trump”. To “trump” is to outbid, “outdo”, outplay, outmaneuver and all of that quite accurately describes the behavior of this President. (Given the convergence of proper name, family name and common noun, the media often prefers both to use his first name, which both indicates his “firstness” – primus inter pares (or rather, “impares”), and to give it a more defined cachet by using the definite article as well: “The

8 In the book of Genesis the phrase “after their kind” occurs multiple times, beginning with the creation of the first living beings (Gen. 1:11).

Donald...”. Donald J. Trump thereby both expresses the ethics of the class to which he belongs, and trumps it as well: there is only one Donald and it is “The Donald”.

8. So much for singularity in the abstract. But it has an origin, or many origins, and they are, as Benjamin insisted of all origins, eminently *historical*: “The category of origin is not, as Cohen believes, a purely logical one, but historical”.⁹ For an origin, as Benjamin knew, was something quite different from a simple beginning. Rather, it involved the effort to reinstate what could not be reproduced and was therefore driven to repeat and transform itself by its intrinsic unattainability. This is no less true of the historicity of singularity in what can be called a specifically “Western” tradition. It is a tradition that is extremely broad and widespread, and yet at the same time it is limited in space and time and therefore does not deserve to be considered universal. By calling it “Western” I seek to designate not a privileged culture but rather to leave room for alternative possibilities. Precisely in an era of “globalization” such a delimitation seems particularly urgent.
9. In addition I grant that the term “Western” as I am using it is something of a misnomer. For what I am arguing is that there is a discernible cultural consistency, which has political, social and economic ramifications, that derives from a “mono-theological” conception of the world. By “mono-theological” I mean the notion of *a single, universal and exclusive Creator-God*. Although I have just used the word “singular” in describing this conception, it is at the antipodes of the kind of singularity that interests me. It is an instance of that “generalized singular” to which I have already referred. In order for singularity to be considered sovereign, self-identical, and the source and model of all being, it must be generalized in its essence, and this tends to subordinate uniqueness to universality. Although I am quite clear that this is not the only way monotheism can be interpreted, what I want to suggest is that this particular interpretation of the universe as the creation of a single, exclusive, Creator-God continues even today to influence contemporary reality far beyond directly religious manifestations, and that this occurs primarily through promotion of what I will call a “mono-theological identity paradigm”.
10. As already mentioned, one of the earliest and most influential expressions of this paradigm can be found in the first *Book of Moses*. The notion of a single, universal Supreme Being preexisting the articulated world, which is then conceived as his “creation”, informs a conception of identity, subjective and objective, in which $A=A$, in which the first-person singular is construed as homogeneous and self-identical. Above all, this first and supreme being is held to stand above and

9 W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 226.

beyond the limitations of space and time, which is to say, the limitations of bodily existence. Such a Supreme Being provides the basis for construing a world, which is then conceived as his “creation”, serves as a paradigm for a notion of identity, subjective and objective, in which $A=A$, in which the first person singular is homogeneous and self-identical and above all – and this is decisive because it indicates what I take to be the motivating force that has given this legend its durability – which above all stands above and beyond the limitations of space and time, which is to say, the limitations of bodily existence.

11. What are the forces that lead to such a notion of a Universal, preexistent Creator-God and above all that give it its power to persist over centuries? In response to this question I offer the following working hypothesis: such a notion is required if one desires or feels constrained to think of Life as essentially a process that exists independently of Death. Why? Because for human beings, Life on earth tends to be experienced as Life in the Singular, and as such is spatially, temporally and above all *corporeally* finite and mortal. The monotheistic identity paradigm thus responds to the wish to escape from the anxiety of a finitude that is difficult to reconcile with representational thinking. Death, insofar as it entails the non-existence of the individuated living being, is rigorously impossible to construe, except from a point of view that is separated from it – in which case the death that one is imagining is rigorously speaking never one’s own but always that of someone else. This paradox that one cannot simply deny the fact of mortality but also not construe its consequences as far as they concern us, can easily produce anxiety and may even be at the root of anxiousness that does not appear to be directly related to the finitude of the living. Such anxiety can however be alleviated, lessened, although probably never entirely eliminated, insofar as a mode of life can be construed that would be unlimited. It is this that the myth of a universal creator God strives to make plausible. It constitutes an attempt to allay anxiety, and this is what has kept it going in certain parts of the world for thousands of years.
12. In Western history, this notion of God as Eternal Life is greatly reinforced and indeed made explicit with the advent of Christianity. Death having been described in Genesis as the result of sin, which is to say, of a human act of transgression, Christianity emphasizes that, as the result of transgression and the expression of guilt, mortality can be transcended and overcome through the sacrifice of the Divine in the form of his Son. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive”.¹⁰ And in the words of Jesus: “I am the way and the truth and the life”.¹¹

10 I Corinthians 15:22.

11 John 14:6.

13. Christianity thus acknowledges the importance of the individual, guilty, mortal human but at the same time subsumes that individual under the generality of the species: namely as divinely created human beings, who, despite their guilt, can yet hope for salvation. I will short-circuit this obviously very reductive and schematic narrative, which I present only because I am convinced that it helps to explain many things in society, economics and politics today, both at the individual and at the collective level. It helps to explain why people often act contrary to their own immediate and long-term interests, and it also helps explain the role of anxiety in such decisions and the actions they lead to.

14. The important fact in this attempt to attenuate the anxiety of being mortal is not, as Nietzsche wrote, that “God is Dead”, but rather the idea that death itself is not simply extinction but can become a pathway to eternal life. The very fact that God can father a son, thereby reinforces the Biblical emphasis on life as originally creation and procreation (“Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it”).¹² Through the voluntary sacrifice of the Son of God, human beings are given the chance of escaping from what the Bible portrays as the cause of their mortality, namely from their sin, which interestingly enough consists in wanting to become too much *like* their Creator. With the advent of Christianity, this difference between Creator and Created is reduced: for the Divine becomes quasi-human in Christ. But if God becomes man, it is so that man can become (like unto) God. The words of Christ I cited earlier include an important second sentence: “I am the way and the truth and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through me*”.¹³

15. This promise – or is it also a threat? – is that of a return, which would involve man becoming like God. But this was precisely the temptation that in the myth led to all the trouble in the first place. The serpent tempted Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil by promising her that she would become “like God”. The temptation repeats itself, although this time collectively and politically, in the story of the Tower of Babel, which materialized the aspiration of the peoples of the earth to attain to the same unity as their Creator. To which God responds:

Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.¹⁴

12 Gen. 1:28.

13 John 14:6.

14 Gen. 11:6-8.

To speak a single language and thus to acquire the possibility of full and universal understanding thus signifies a unity and lack of limitation that both mirrors and endangers the exclusive prerogative of their Divine Creator. In the Garden of Eden, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was placed alongside the Tree of Life. The lack of limitation in knowledge and understanding thus can be seen as a metonymy for the lack of limitation of life itself.

16. It is this desire for a time and space-transcending unity, which implies permanence if not ubiquity, that constitutes the basis on which what I am calling the *monotheological identity paradigm* could extend itself beyond the explicitly religious domain to what are today considered more “secular” forms of life: politics, economics, society, international relations, and today: “globalization”. And this extension is also the condition under which the difference between those different domains can be considered to be underwritten by a more profound continuity. But this continuity is marked by contradiction and instability. For as an identity-paradigm it is intrinsically unattainable. Individual living beings cannot shake off or overcome the finite conditions of their individuation: which means however that in view of the monotheological identity-paradigm, they cannot attain to true in-dividuality. At least not directly. But they can hope to participate in this ideal indirectly. For instance, through identification with a collective – political, ethnic, cultural, national -- that is considered less finite or even possibly immortal. Or through the more prosaic process of financial speculation.

17. Indeed, there are good reasons to think that capital itself is one of the most potent avatars of the monotheological dream of life producing ever more life without end: a surplus life that would not be constitutively limited by death, as it is with every singular living being.¹⁵ The model here is money producing more money, value producing surplus value, credit (creo) producing interest. In conformity with the notion of a Garden of Eden before the Fall, value is created to produce more value just as life was held to be originally created to produce more life, without any intrinsic end in sight.¹⁶ Marx however, adapting the labor-theory of value of David Ricardo, argued that the self-aggrandizing tendency of capital – value producing surplus-value – was in fact only the external façade of a more sinister process of the exploitation of social labor, which he compared often enough to that of a vampire sucking the blood of society. Marx thus developed the link between on

15 I have discussed this in my essay, “Money is Time: Thoughts on Credit and Crisis”, in I. Gill, H. Da Silva (ed.), *The Cultural Life of Money*, de Gruyter, 2015, 23-46.

16 In *The Leviathan*, one of the founding texts of modern political theory, Hobbes insists on the incompatibility of the notions of Immortality and of Generation, and therefore on a certain incoherence of the Garden of Eden. (“Texts Concerning the Place of Life Eternal for All Beleevers”).

the one hand the religious-Trinitarian dimension of capitalistic augmentation – money exchanged for commodities producing more money (M-C-M) – with the reality of life being exchanged for death in order to produce more life, whereby survival tends to converge with perishing, enrichment (of the few) with impoverishment (of the many).

18. One of the historical conditions that promotes the spread of Capitalism, as is well-known, was the spread of Calvinism as one of the major effects of the Protestant Reformation. But there is another branch of the Reformation that is perhaps more “original”, at least in the Benjaminian sense, and which Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and Benjamin, in the *Origins of the German Mourning Play*, both emphasize: namely, the radical antinomianism of Luther. According to Weber, had there been no Calvin, no Reformed Church, but only Lutheranism, the Protestant Ethic would never have provided the support for the spread of Capitalism that it did. Why not? Because for Luther – and this is what Benjamin also insists on – it was not “good works” but “faith alone” – sola fide – that could provide a path from sinful mortal life to divine Grace and Salvation. Good works, Benjamin emphasizes, designated not just the Catholic sacraments, which Luther largely rejected, but all intentional, goal-directed human activity. This would then include economic activity and above all, economic success.
19. It is at this point, then, that the history of singularity in the West takes a decisive turn. Prior to the Reformation, one can argue, however simplistically, that the path from the single, fallen, guilty human being, to eternal life was in part at least amenable to human action, especially under the guidance and auspices of a Church that declared itself “Universal” – “Catholic” (*Greek: kath’ holou*, on the whole, in general). The path between fallen earthly immanence and resurrection was more or less open and transparent. With the Reformation, especially in its “original”, Lutheran form, this way became considerably obscured, since “faith alone”, radically distinguished from “works”, including “laws”, becomes difficult to access or to ascertain. It becomes a question of the “heart”, of the interior, and is in principle no less amenable to the perception of the individual subject than is the outside world. In short, one can never be entirely certain that one “has faith”, that one is “keeping the faith”: and faith here is not merely “belief” but also loyalty to, being *true to* the Word of Christ. This aspect of faith – perhaps like all “belief” – reflects the desire to surmount the uncertainties of time (and space) insofar as these serve not only as dimensions of fulfillment but as media of change, alteration and ultimately of mortality. What is subject to change and to alteration, and finally to extinction, cannot hope to be a self or an “I” except in the sense of an imperfect sinner. But this imperfection remains measured against the ideal articulated by God’s response when

asked by Moses to reveal his name: “I am that (or who) I am” or, in another translation, “I am Who I will be” (Exodus 3:14). This is perhaps the most cogent articulation of the monotheological identity paradigm: The I is only fully itself, only fully an I, to the extent that it is capable of staying essentially the same over time and space. “Staying the same” here does not of course exclude change. On the contrary, the imperfect nature of man implies that the human Self must indeed change, but in so doing it must also be able to assimilate that change to an underlying unity.

20. This identity paradigm can apply to individual persons, but also to collective entities, to states, nations or peoples, for instance. And when it is so applied, it can easily become the basis for imperial or colonial ambitions, which involve the power to assimilate the other to oneself, often by subordinating differences into sameness. We see this tendency playing itself out throughout history, whether in the age of European or Western Imperialism or in the so-called “post-colonial” age, which strikes me as an ideological misnomer for what is really a *neo-Colonial* age: Colonizing and ruling by proxy, even and especially if those proxies are native-born.
21. Everything I have been describing about singularity and its absorption into individualism through the Protestant Reformation applies primarily to a large but nevertheless specific and limited cultural tradition that I take to be informed by the idea of a single, supreme, exclusive, Creator-God, or more secularly, who see the world as a creation populated by creatures. To be sure, the relation to this Creator-God is mediated by prophets, by his son, by institutions. And to be sure, many people living in these societies today consider themselves “secular” and independent of such religious traditions. But I want to argue that this is deceptive, and that the notion of “worldliness” that is usually associated with that of “secular”, together with that of time-bound change and contingency, remains for many subject to a sense of identity, subjective and objective, that is largely dependent on the religious tradition from which it distinguishes itself – dependent by positing a sense of Self that places its innermost structure above time and space, and thus implies a certain immortality: or at the very least, a self that is not limited by finitude. The frequency with which one uses in English today the word “creative” is symptomatic of the continuing strength of this religious sense of self. It feeds off the unacknowledged or compartmentalized anxieties arising from the intrinsic limitations of *life in the singular*: this sense of Self, together with the very real process of dispossession that in both the developed and the developing world is increasing the gap between rich and poor, provides the basis for the obsession with “security” that plays such a decisive role in political discourse and political policies. Not that there are not legitimate concerns about security; but such concerns, tied to specific, situational factors, is all the more easily deflected from reflection upon the actual causes

of those factors by being presented as the result of an easily identifiable “enemy” that could be controlled if not eradicated by force. The suicidal insistence in the United States that all individuals should have the right to bear arms, and not just any arms but the deadliest weapons as well, is just one indication of how such anxieties can be exploited to distract from consideration of measures that might affect the causes of social unrest.

22. This situation of course is peculiar to the United States: it does not exist in the same way in other countries, which nevertheless are also indebted to the monotheistic culture I have been describing. There are always going to be specific and different factors at work in different societies and situations, and I don't mean to ignore or minimize them. But many of those societies and situations – not all, but many – are affected by a fundamental ambiguity in the notion of self-identity that I have been describing, between a claim at homogeneity and autonomy on the one hand, and an experience of heterogeneity that is no less decisive. As soon as it is necessary to construe autonomy along the model of a divine Creator God, a moment of heterogeneity is introduced at the very moment that it is also mobilized to justify a notion of individualized homogeneity: that of an I who is essentially itself: I am who I am or who I will be. This unresolvable tension between the ideal model and its actualization in finite individuals is exacerbated in the Lutheran conception of the individual. On the one hand, the individual is made the inalterable cornerstone in the relation of the mortal to the immortal, the human to the divine: a relation that operates through “faith” and grace. But at the same time, this individual is anything but autonomous: it is not considered to be the proprietor of faith, which, Luther insists, has to be understood as a “gift” from God that stands in no calculable connection to anything the individual can do or not do. In short, the individual cannot actively influence his or her salvation, which is entirely the product of the incommensurable gift of faith. Indeed, Luther even warns individuals not to be certain that they know whether they truly do have faith,¹⁷ thus revealing that the relation between faith and knowledge is anything but a simple opposition.

23. There is then a strong tension if not contradiction between the individual – and not the Church or the institution – as the *site* of redemption, and the inability of the individual to contribute decisively to his or her destiny. Omnipotence and impotence have never been more closely allied than here. This can and does often result in an explosive combination. We see this every day in the United States, and to some extent in its foreign policies, which rely so heavily on militarization to

17 M. Luther, 124-125.

resolve problems that are social, economic and political. In this respect it remains to be seen if the policies of President Trump will be different from those advocated by Hillary Clinton.

24. But there is also another aspect to this contradiction that is potentially more promising and less self-destructive. It can be seen in the limitation of individual autonomy through the emphasis on the individual as recipient of the “gift” of “grace”: a gift that cannot be commanded, deserved or even acknowledged. Since Luther emphasizes that this gift goes *to* the “heart,” even if it does not come *from* the heart,¹⁸ he thereby suggests that what seems most intimate to the self-conscious, calculating, self-conscious individual must not be considered as its private property over which it can dispose as it sees fit. Rather, what is most important to the individual is a “gift” that comes from elsewhere. In this sense “faith” entails the possibility of being open to the other – not just to external others, but also and simultaneously to the traces of alterity that compose one’s personal history, which, as the result of many interactions, constitute it in its distinctive and singular heterogeneity. In other words, the heterogeneity of history makes every individual what Novalis once called a “dividual”¹⁹: constitutively and singularly *divided*. This begins perhaps with one’s name, which is never just one’s exclusive private property but public and private, singular and collective at once.

25. Let me conclude these remarks then with a question: What I have been describing applies to a large-scale but nevertheless far from universal *monotheological* tradition. And indeed, it is a specific branch of that tradition, namely the one growing out of the Protestant Reformation, and in particular its Lutheran (not Calvinist) theology. My working hypothesis – an hypothesis that can only be justified (neither verified nor falsified) by reference to the extent that it can illuminate our contemporary situation, in which organized religious observances have receded considerably, at least in “Western Europe”. My suspicion is that what I have tried to describe as the “monotheological identity paradigm” – which is to say, the projection of a single, universal and self-contained creator-god – continues to inform the way identity in general is conceived and practiced, whether subjective or objective, individual or collective, private or public. I have further suggested that the continuity of this tradition, even in the face of a scientific and technical world that at first sight seems inhospitable to it, is symptomatic of a continuing inability to acknowledge life as something that is necessarily and structurally limited in duration. This is tantamount to subordinating the perspective and experience of singular, living beings to a concept of Life written

18 *Ibid.*

19 Novalis, *The Encyclopedia*, VI. Section: The Philological Sciences, 2. Poetics (1), 1363.

with a capital L, as being essentially unbounded and universal. This rejection is not always or even mostly conscious or deliberate, but can for that very reason be all the more powerful and sweeping. Since it draws its power from the ability to assuage, more or less temporarily, the anxiety before death that is unthinkable – unimaginable – in terms of the representational thought that dominates at least in the West. In times of shifting power-relations, redistribution of wealth and increasing precariousness, this anxiety can and has been mobilized to seek to reinstate a mythical past rather than to apprehend an uncertain future. A particularly menacing result is a socio-economic, political and technical system that increasingly threatens the conditions under which all forms of life can reproduce themselves on earth. Another related result is what can be called the militarization of politics, which tries to resolve all problems, disputes and uncertainties through the application of military force. This as we have seen in the past decades, generally augments destructive forces in the process of trying to destroy them. Legitimate need for “security” is thereby confused and conflated with the intrinsically unlimited and self-destructive “War Against Terror”.

26. In short, as long as we are not able to *distinguish between the anxieties* that arise from the unrepresentability of mortality, as it affects singular living beings, and the fear-producing degradation of social, political and economic living conditions, we will be tempted to resort to ever more destructive means of trying to resolve such problems, above all by identifying enemies and strategies as “Terrorists” and “Terrorism”, and thereby ignore the all too real violence that produces both but also transcends them. The result is a proliferation of unending and unwinnable “wars”: against “drugs,” against “terror”. But such wars are themselves a drug that anesthetize thinking by offering it an ostensible enemy that can be either eliminated or at least controlled and confined, walled off and out, in the name of Homeland Security.

27. But the danger cannot be banished by walls and barriers, even if it can thereby be temporarily reduced. As long as the heterogeneity of what I am calling “life in the singular” is not accepted and in its manifold aspects discerned and distinguished, the anxieties it produces will contribute to the self-destructive tendencies of societies: Derrida sought to analyze this in his later writings as the phenomenon of “auto-immunity”, of a drive to protect the same from the different, the self from the other, and which in its fervor winds up attacking and debilitating itself. It is perhaps worth noting that for the first time, to my knowledge, the “enemy” that most constituted polities – nation-states – are mobilized against is not a person or a movement or an ideology, but a “feeling” – namely, *terror* – and feelings cannot be changed unless the conditions that produce them are acknowledged. And indeed, if feelings can be modified, it is not at all certain that they can be conquered.

28. My question now is simply this: since what I have been describing and analyzing as a historical tradition that is widespread but not universal, is most closely related to the modern history of Christianity, and in particular the Reformation, to what extent is what I am calling the “monotheological identity paradigm” at work in other parts of the world? How might the sense of “self”, of individual and collective identity, of subjective and objective identities, differ in a society informed by a monotheistic but non-Christian tradition, with respect to the kind of “individualism” that is characteristic of the American Protestant tradition (with all of its internal contradictions)? And finally, to what extent is “globalization” a means of imposing one particular cultural tradition upon the world at large, or a means of contesting that attempt at hegemony?

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