

Bartleby has left the building: Autism and Derrida

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Introduction

The story of *Bartleby the scrivener* is narrated by a former employer of him, a lawyer who as his business grows hires the pale, young man as a scrivener, someone who copies legal documents by hand. Initially, Bartleby turns out to be very good at the job, copying documents flawlessly, in a very steady handwriting, and above all at an unseen pace. He never rests, and seems to 'gorge' himself on the documents, as if he has an insatiable drive to copy. When the narrator asks Bartleby to help him with checking a copy for errors, Bartleby utters his infamous phrase: 'I would prefer not to'. Somewhat taken aback, the narrator asks again, only to receive the same response. This scene repeats itself a number of times. As time passes, Bartleby copies less and less. Sometimes he spends hours standing in his office, looking out the window at a wall on the other side of the street, in what the narrator comes to call his 'dead wall reveries'. Eventually he gives up on copying altogether, and stands completely still. The narrator grows increasingly uneasy in the presence of this mysterious figure, and he tries to persuade Bartleby to leave. He attempts to reason with him, but to no avail. Eventually he sees no other solution but to move to a different building himself. Bartleby however still remains on the premises until he is eventually arrested and sent to the city's jail, where he refuses to eat and eventually starves to death (*Bartleby the scrivener: a story of Wall-Street*, Herman Melville, 1856).

Herman Melville's famous short story has sparked many interpretations and readings. A relatively recent interpretation is that of Bartleby as being on the autism spectrum (*Bartleby's Autism: Wandering along Incommunicability*, Amit Pinchevski, 2011, 27). As Stuart Murray puts it,

[...] it is arguably a point of observation, more than one of critical interpretation, that his characteristics map onto a general template of autistic subjectivity. Bartleby undoubtedly performs what we today can recognize as an autistic presence. (*Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, Stuart Murray, 2008, 53)

Murray argues that the interpretation of Bartleby as autistic is fundamentally different from (most) other interpretations, that assume Bartleby to be acting out of some kind of unspoken, often ideological motive (Murray, 2008, 58). In the 'autistic reading', Bartleby does not act the way he does because he for instance refuses to take part a capitalist society as proposed by David Kuebrich (*Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in "Bartleby"*, David Kuebrich, 1996, 386), but because he is, in and of himself, *strange*. As Naomi C. Reed proposes,

[...] what would it mean to take Melville at his word and read Bartleby as an apparition? We would be reminded of what current critics of the story seem to have forgotten: Bartleby is strange. (*The Specter of Wall Street: "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and the Language of Commodities*, Naomi C. Reed, 2004, 247)

Linda Costanzo Cahir proposes a similar although not explicitly 'autistic' interpretation, putting more emphasis on the inaccessibility of the character of Bartleby from the viewpoint of the narrator, who in the face of Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' struggles to retain his sense of morality and his self-image:

For Melville, the mystery of Bartleby – the mystery of the essential nature of a particular person – is an eternal, implacable ambiguity, and our existential alienation from one another is a reality whose cause we can never fully apprehend or overturn. (*Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton*, Linda Costanzo Cahir, 1999, 60)

However, not all interpretations of Bartleby as autistic can be completely understood as seeing Bartleby or his perceived autism as a condition that is given. Some seem to understand his 'autism' rather an expression of a desire, however abstract that desire may be:

Bartleby provides us with an opportunity to study a subject's expression of his autism, where relinquishing of the self's executive ego functions becomes a lingual invitation to the other to fill the absence of function with the nurture of care, to cradle in supporting arms the dissolving self in its unintegrated muteness, as the other is induced, without words, to create the ambience desired by a self-dying in order to be reborn. (*Melville's Lost Self: "Bartleby"*, Christopher Bollas, 1974, 401)

Bartleby's dysfunctional autism is a psychosomatic communication, a use of the self as signifier where the signified, broadly represents the loss of generative illusion, and specifically, the loss of the paternal and maternal imagos. (Bollas, 1974, 403)

For Bollas, 'autism' seems to be the result of trauma, in this case the 'relinquishing of the self's executive ego' and the 'loss of generative illusion', which in turn invites the other, the narrator, to nurture, or heal this trauma, so that Bartleby can be 'reborn'. Even though it does refer to Bartleby as autistic, this interpretation seems to actually be closer to the Marxist interpretation of Bartleby, as it supposes him to act out of an 'absence', a 'loss'; something that should be there but isn't.

The apparent disagreement, or at least lack of decisive consensus, on what it would mean to say that 'Bartleby is autistic', leads us to the question of how to understand the concept of autism. In the first chapter, I will discuss a common present-day understanding of autism, namely as a form of incommunicability. This notion of incommunicability rests on a notion of normal, unproblematic communicability. Considering Derrida's concepts of iterability and Otherness, this notion cannot be retained. This leads us to the question of how to understand Bartleby, if we can no longer say that autism is a form of incommunicability.

In this paper, I will attempt to come to an understanding of autism through the work of Derrida, and what it would mean to interpret the figure of Bartleby in this way. In the second chapter I will discuss the differences between Derrida's notion of Otherness, and that of Levinas. Where for Levinas the Other can and should remain fully ungraspable, Derrida argues that in order to conceive of the Other as such, the Other must be recognized as a transcendental ego. We 'engage' this transcendental ego in language, by deciding to believe in the truthfulness of their testimonies regarding their subjective experience. In the third chapter I will discuss how Derrida compares Bartleby to the biblical figure of Abraham. Derrida takes Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' as a 'response without response', a (non)linguistic possibility that he believes to be constitutive of the possibility of (ethical) responsibility to Others.

In the final chapter, I will argue that an interpretation of Bartleby as an Other in the sense of Levinas is not satisfactory, as it does not account for the enigma that he still remains to be. As an alternative, I will discuss the possibility of interpreting Bartleby in the context of Derrida, as defined precisely by his lack of testimony regarding his own subjective experience. As he only 'responds without responding', he does not fully engage in language. As for Derrida, we encounter the Other in language, Bartleby cannot be said to be 'fully' Other. As Derrida says his phrase to be 'haunted by a silhouette of content', we can perhaps say that Bartleby is the 'silhouette of an Other'.

Objections to autism as incommunicability

Autism as incommunicability

For Amit Pinchevski, autism cannot be simply seen as a psychological disorder among many others. It can be seen as the 'ultimate manifestation of a communicational boundary' (*Displacing incommunicability: Autism as a epistemological boundary*, Amit Pinchevski, 2005, 163). As such, it takes the place of a 'paradigmatic condition' for a number of theories concerning communication, health and ultimately the human condition itself. These theories vary widely, but what they all have in common is that they take communication to be the norm, and incommunicability to be a deviation from that norm.

Bollas' understanding of autism for instance seems to be close to that of Bruno Bettelheim, who saw a similarity between incommunicable behaviour of autistic children and that of survivors of concentration camps, and proposed that they must have a common cause, namely severe existential trauma (Pinchevski, 2011, 37). A more contemporary example of one of these theories, that perhaps takes us closer to the understanding of autism as a 'given condition', would be Simon Baron-Cohen's idea of the Theory of Mind. This theory poses that non-autistic humans possess the ability to 'read minds'. This means that they are naturally predisposed to, and have unknowingly practiced from birth, predicting what others are thinking or feeling to such an extent that even when little words are used, they are able to 'fill in the gaps' and still understand each other perfectly. Autism for Baron-Cohen would then be the absence of this ability. (*Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*, Simon Baron-Cohen, 1997, 2).

As Pinchevski argues, by being seen as a fringe phenomenon, exterior to the ordinary condition of 'unproblematic communication', autism constitutes this ordinary condition as such. This means that the answer to the question what the difference is between autistic and non-autistic people forms the basis of an understanding of how human communication works in the first place:

[...] is it not equally possible to read autism, or more precisely mindblindness, the other way around? That is, constitutive of Theory of Mind rather than explained by it? [...] Without autism, Theory of Mind would simply make no sense, and without the idea of mindblindness, mindreading would be equally meaningless. (Pinchevski, 2005, 170).

Objection from iterability

To question this notion of 'unproblematic ordinary communication', and thereby the divide between the communicable Same and the incommunicable autistic Other, Pinchevski turns to the work of Jacques Derrida. According to Derrida, the possibility of failure of language, of words being uttered out of context or without meaning, is inherent to language and even constitutive of it. He introduces the concept of iterability:

[...] by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of "communicating," precisely. (*Signature Event Context*, Jacques Derrida, 1971, 418)

In order to be a sign, something must be iterable, meaning that it must be possible to repeat it outside of any context and still be understood.

This means that any sign, be it a spoken or written word, a gesture or even an object (a sign-thing), always carries the possibility of being disconnected from its commonly perceived meaning and context. It is perfectly possible to say 'you may now kiss the bride' when you are in the supermarket and the cashier has asked you whether or not you would like the receipt. Your words will be understood, as they are perfectly intelligible, commonly spoken words and even form a grammatically correct sentence. However, since they do not make sense within the context of the situation, no linguistic act is successfully performed. Within the theory of language of John Austin, which Derrida criticizes, this would be an example of 'faulty' or even 'parasitic' use of language:

[Austin] insists on the fact that this possibility remains abnormal, parasitic, that it constitutes a kind of extenuation or agonized succumbing of language that we should strenuously distance ourselves from and resolutely ignore. And the concept of the "ordinary," thus of "ordinary language," to which he has recourse is clearly marked by this exclusion. (Derrida, 1971, 16)

It may be an odd side effect of the actual, meaningful use of the words, but in any case not something that really 'belongs' to the realm of language. Derrida disagrees with Austin's dismissive stance. He argues that if it were not possible for communication to 'fail', that is to say for words to be disconnected from their meaning, language would not be able to function the way it does. If the words 'you may now kiss the bride' could only be uttered by a priest in front of an altar, and only as a completion of the rites of marriage, it would be impossible for someone to learn how to become a priest for instance, as that would require his teacher to be able to utter the words and explain how they are to be used without having to marry people every time just to be able to repeat them. On a broader scale, it would also make it impossible for the people who are to be married and those witnessing it to understand what is going on, as they will have never heard those words before and will therefore not know their meaning. As Derrida formulates it:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a "citation"? (Derrida, 1971, 18)

Generally put, if linguistic acts are performed every time the words associated with them are uttered, it would be impossible to refer to those words in order to establish them as a linguistic act in the first place (Derrida, 1971, 20). The possibility of language to 'fail' is thus not a parasitic fringe phenomenon as Austin describes it, but rather in inherent possibility without which language could not exist.

Objection from Otherness

In addition to there being no such thing as 'infallible language' due to iterability, Pinchevski makes a second, perhaps more fundamental objection to the notion of 'unproblematic communication' from Derrida's concept of 'Otherness', which is largely similar to that of Emmanuel Levinas. For Derrida, the Other is and will always remain something that is out of reach, that we can never fully know or understand. For Derrida, every Other is 'wholly Other', meaning that every Other is Other in every respect:

Every other (one) is every (bit) other [tout autre est tout autre], everyone else is completely or wholly other. (*The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida, 1995, 68)

This wholly Other cannot be incorporated in any way. We cannot know what is 'inside' or 'behind' the Other, or describe the Other in terms of general terms or principles. In this way, the Other is 'infinitely singular' (Derrida, 1995, 86), that is to say completely unique. No comparison, generality or analogy can possibly hope describe the Other.

If communication were to be a direct 'printout' of the contents of the mind of the speaker, which can then be 'copied' into the mind of the listener, the speaker and the listener would not be Others for one another, but rather one and the same. In order to fully understand what you mean when you say something, I would have to have complete access to your state of mind when you say it. I would have to know your subjective experience as if it were my own, I would have to be able to occupy your point of view, perceive what you perceive. If this were possible, as for instance Baron-Cohen's concept of the Theory of Mind seems to suggest to an extent, I would be able to essentially *become* you. Your subjective experience would be fully contained within mine. The Other would be 'appropriated' by the Self, as Levinas formulates it (Derrida, 2005, 132). In this state, there would be no more communication, but only 'dead silence' (Pinchevski, 2005, 178). 'Perfect communication', if such a thing were possible, would no longer be communication at all. It would be the complete merging of two transcendental ego's into one, after which no more language would be needed (Pinchevski, 2005, 168). It is the possibility of failure of communication between us that distinguishes you from me as an Other, that marks your independent existence.

If failure to communicate is an inherent part of language, what the difference is between Bartleby and for instance Turkey, Nippers of the narrator himself. What is the matter with Bartleby? There must be some difference between Bartleby and Turkey or Nippers for instance, who both seem to be understandable to the narrator, whereas Bartleby remains perfectly enigmatic. How can Bartleby be understood according to Derrida, and can an understanding of 'autism' be formulated at all within the context of his work?

Testimony

Before we can continue with Derrida's own analysis of Bartleby, I will briefly go over Derrida's concept of the Other, as it differs from that of Levinas on a number of ways that are relevant for the understanding of the figure of Bartleby and the concept of autism within the thought of Derrida.

For Levinas, the Other can and should remain fully out of reach, whereas for Derrida the Other, in order to be appreciated as such, must be conceivable as a transcendental ego (Derrida, 2005, 119). As Levinas reasons, for the Other to be appresented in any way would lead to it losing its 'otherness', becoming a part of the experience of the Self (*The Self, The Other and the Many: Derrida on Testimony*, Marie-Eve Morin, 2007, 169). This analogical appresentation would take the form of the 'alter ego', that would essentially be an extension of the ego:

According to Levinas, by making the other [...] the ego's phenomenon, constituted by analogical appresentation on the basis of belonging to the ego's own sphere, Husserl allegedly missed the infinite alterity of the other, reducing it to the same. To make the other an alter ego, Levinas says frequently, is to neutralize its absolute alterity. (Derrida, 2005, 132)

On this point, Derrida disagrees with Levinas. According to Derrida, there is an absolute Otherness in the appresentation of the alter ego, precisely because it is recognized by the Self as another transcendental ego. In this way, it can both be said to fundamentally Other and fundamentally the

Same (Morin, 2007, 170). Another ego would be the transcendental equivalent to the Self, but since it is a different ego, a different point of perception, it can never fully coincide with it:

The other is not myself – and who has ever maintained that it is? – but it is *an* Ego, as Levinas must suppose in order to maintain his own discourse. The passage from Ego to other as an Ego is the passage to the essential, non-empirical *egoity* of subjective existence *in general*. (Derrida, 2005, 119)

If the other were not recognized as a transcendental alter ego, it would be entirely in the world and not, as ego, the origin of the world. [. . .] The egoity of the other permits him to say 'ego' as I do; and this is why he is Other, and not a stone, or a being without speech in my real economy. Despite the logical absurdity of this formulation, this economy is the transcendental symmetry of two empirical asymmetries. (*Violence and Metaphysics*, Jacques Derrida, 2005, 135)

Derrida goes on to criticise Levinas' claim that we can have a notion of the Other if this Other cannot be grasped in any way. He argues that in order for the Other to be to be conceptualized as such, it must somehow be recognizable as a transcendental ego:

[...] it is impossible to encounter the alter ego (in the very form of the encounter described by Levinas), impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general). (Derrida, 2005, 132)

This seems to put Derrida in a difficult position. He claims on the one hand that the Other cannot be known, is and will always be *wholly Other*, but on the other hand acknowledges that the Other must be conceivable as another Ego. In the *Politics of Friendship*, there are a few passages that might give us an insight into how Derrida 'resolves' this apparent contradiction. When he discusses how we can relate to our friends as such, how we can know that they are in fact our friends, he states that:

[...] inner benevolence is never directly accessible, originarily and 'in person', as a phenomenologist would say, but only in 'appresentation' with the help of an outward sign: with the help of testimony. (*Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida, 1994, 256)

In other words, we can only access the 'inner benevolence', or in the same way any inner state, through an 'outward sign', through what Derrida calls 'testimony'. Through this testimony the Other signifies, that is to say they put into signs, their subjective experience. 'Testimony' is not meant in the strictly legal sense of the word, but can be any statement that 'testifies' of the inner state, the subjective experience, of the one who makes the testimony. This means that a testimony is not merely a factual statement, in the sense that it cannot only relate to that which can be presented to both the giver and the receiver. A statement or utterance is a testimony if it in one way or another it relates to the subjective experience of the speaker, and affirms that there is such a thing.

To illustrate this, we could think for instance of the difference between a computer-generated voice, which we commonly assume not to have any kind of subjective experience behind it, and a human. In case of a purely factual statement, it would make no difference whether it is uttered by the computer or by the human. If the computer says 'no, you cannot receive a loan at this bank', this statement is not affected by the perceived absence of a subjective experience on the part of the computer. Had a human uttered the statement, it would be understood in more or less the same way. If the computer on the other hand says 'I love you', we would not believe that this statement is true, and not attach any value or relevance to it, as we do not assume the computer to have an experience of love, or any experience at all. In this case, had the human made the statement, we

would take it in a completely different way, and might perceive it as very meaningful. It should be emphasized here that the point is not that we can somehow 'know' that the computer has no subjective experience and the human does. Rather, the point is to show the difference between 'purely factual' statements which do not require us to believe in the subjective experience of the one that makes them and 'testimonies', which do.

As a testimony by definition relates to a subjective experience, there is no way to ever verify if they are true. To verify a sentence like 'I love you', we would have to peer into the inner experience of the person who says it. In other words, we would have to know what is 'inside' this Other, which Derrida in agreement with Levinas argues to be impossible. A testimony can never be 'proven'. That is to say, it cannot be assessed from a meta-viewpoint in order to validate it:

To express this in the case of a telegram: 'I love you' cannot and must not hope to prove anything at all. Testimony or act of faith, such a declaration can decide only providing it wants to remain theoretically undecidable, improbable, given over in darkness to the exception of a singularity without rule and without concept. (Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 219)

If I say: 'I love you', and to know whether I am speaking truthfully you turn to my best friend who answers: 'he does', you would again run into the same question of whether he is speaking truthfully. You cannot look into my experience to see if I am truthful, and there is no external authority or method of validation you can depend on (*A Taste for the Secret*, Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, 1997, 71). Any claim about the testimony would in itself simply be another testimony. Morin describes a distinction between truth and truthfulness:

A testimony can be true in the sense that it corresponds to the facts, without being truthful, without the witness speaking in good faith. On the other hand, a testimony can be truthful because the witness relates what he has experienced, even though his account does not correspond to the facts. This is not to say that the objective world, the one true world, does not exist, but rather that it cannot guarantee the truth of the testimony, or more precisely, the truthfulness of the witness, because what is essential to the testimony is the relation of the singular witness to the event. (Morin, 2007, 174)

Believing in a testimony is therefore always an 'act of faith'. A testimony can only therefore become meaningful if it carries with it the – implicit – promise that it is truthful. If this promise would not be there, the receiver of the testimony would not be given to option to believe in it and engage with it (Morin, 2007, 173). If the words 'I love you' would carry with them any implication that they are truthful, as is the case with the computer for instance, they would not be meaningful. The act of faith that is the basis for the engagement with language can no longer be performed, and the engagement falters: the phrase indeed becomes 'meaningless'. The promise of truthfulness is what allows us to engage with a testimony on the basis of which we can assume the existence of the Other.

Derrida on Bartleby

Abraham's sacrifice

Having discussed Derrida's understanding of Otherness, we will now look at what he himself has written on Bartleby. Derrida compares the scrivener to the biblical figure of Abraham. Abraham is

told by God to sacrifice his son Isaac on the top of mount Moriah. As they approach the mountain top, Isaac asks him where the sacrificial lamb can be found. Abraham answers: 'God will provide a lamb'. Abraham responds to Isaac without disclosing any relevant information about the situation. He does not outright lie or keep silent, but he does not truly answer Isaac's question either. Rather, he talks around the subject:

[...] even if he says everything, he need only keep silent on a single thing for one to conclude that he hasn't spoken. Such a silence takes over his whole discourse. So he speaks and doesn't speak. He responds without responding. He responds and doesn't respond. He responds indirectly. He speaks in order not to say anything about the essential thing that he must keep secret. (Derrida, 1995, 59)

Abraham is 'speaking in tongues', meaning that what he says is essentially unintelligible: no relevant information could ever be communicated by it. For Derrida, this is an example of a 'response without a response' similar to Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to':

Just as Abraham doesn't speak a human language, just as he speaks in tongues or in a language that is foreign to every other human language, and in order to do that responds without responding, speaks without saying anything either true or false, says nothing determinate that would be equivalent to a statement, a promise or a lie, in the same way Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" takes on the responsibility of a response without response. It evokes the future without either predicting or promising; it utters nothing fixed, determinable, positive, or negative. The modality of this repeated utterance that says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses or accepts anything, the tense of this singularly insignificant statement reminds one of a nonlanguage or a secret language. Is it not as if Bartleby were also speaking "in tongues"? But in saying nothing general or determinable, Bartleby doesn't say absolutely nothing. 'I would prefer not to' looks like an incomplete sentence. Its indeterminacy creates a tension: it opens onto a sort of reserve of incompleteness; it announces a temporary or provisional reserve, one involving a proviso. Can we not find there the secret of a hypothetical reference to some indecipherable providence or prudence? We don't know what he wants or means to say, or what he doesn't want to do or say, but we are given to understand quite dearly that he would prefer not to. The silhouette of a content haunts this response (Derrida, 1995, 75).

'I would prefer not to' is not an affirmation nor a negation, Bartleby does not say 'yes' or 'no'. Had he said something like 'I do not want to do that', it would have been a clear negative response. It would have implied that he has a desire not to do the particular thing that has been asked of him. To have a desire implies having a subjective experience, which would indeed enable us to take his words as a testimony and decide to 'believe in Bartleby'. 'To prefer' however does not necessarily have to be read as 'to desire'. It is not said that he 'prefers not to' because he does not want to do it, has other desires, or any desires at all. It does not give any clue as to why he 'prefers not to', it merely states that he does.

Response and responsibility

In order to understand what Derrida means by 'response without response', and what the significance of such a response is within his way of thinking, we must understand Derrida's concept of response.

Since in Derrida's thought we can only conceive of one another through language, namely through testimony, we must respond to one another in order to be able to have any kind of relationship. If we were not to respond to one another, we would not be able to meet or engage with the one another in any way. The promise to respond precedes all interaction, as it precedes the very notion of 'Other'. It is therefore an a priori condition to any engagement with Others or even with ourselves, as even in soliloquy makes use of signs, which can only function as such if they are iterable. This iterability can only exist within a community of Others. In order to even have a conception of the Self, one must have a conception of the Other, which requires that there is a relation of *responsibility* between the Self and the Other(s).

Since the way in which we respond is through the sign, that is constituted in a community of Others, we are always in a state of fundamental heteronomy. Heteronomy is the opposite of autonomy, meaning that if you are heteronomous you are governed by something outside of yourself. We cannot be 'truly autonomous', as we are always under the influence of the signs we use that do not originate in ourselves but through a multitude of Others. This 'arche-passivity' is a passivity beyond the opposition of passivity and activity. This is the passiveness that we have in regard to using language that is not our own, for it necessarily exists outside of us, to which we are always subjected (*Bartleby-Derrida: Literature, Law and Responsibility*, Shela Sheikh, 2013, 2).

For Derrida, response is inevitably tied to responsibility in the ethical sense (Derrida, 1995, 61). By responding, we engage not only in a relation to the Other, but more specifically in an ethical relation to the Other. We are therefore always in a position of *responsibility* towards Others (Derrida, 1995, 68). The language we use and are subjected to carries with it certain ethical implications, traces of laws and moral principles. It is impossible to explain for instance what theft is without introducing the concept of property, and the notion that property belongs to person who owns it and is not to be taken from them without permission. A word like 'theft' can only be understood in relation to a general law of ownership. When using the word, we cannot but relate to this law in one way or the other.

'Theft' is of course an easy example to give, as it is commonly used as a legal term. If we take for example a noun, like 'tree' or 'table' it might be hard to see how they carry any traces of morality. However, we do not relate through the Other simply through language in general, but through testimony. An 'ethically neutral' sentence like 'the table is hanging from the tree' would not be a testimony. An utterance that is a testimony, such as 'I love you', must relate to the subjective experience of the one that speaks it. In order to relate to the Other in a morally neutral way, we would have to be able to make a testimony that does not carry any ethical implications. It seems impossible to say something that does relate to subjective experience but is still morally neutral, for the simple reason that subjective experience is by definition never neutral, never 'purely factual'.

Irresponsibility

The story of Abraham reveals what for Derrida is a fundamental problem of all ethics. By being responsible to God, Abraham is irresponsible to Isaac. By being thrown a priori into a state of

responsibility towards a singular Other, we are also always in a state of irresponsibility towards all 'other Others' (Sheikh, 2013, 11). In other words, in our responsibility towards one, we always *sacrifice* our responsibility towards another; we are always in a position in which we must sacrifice one to the other. For Derrida, the choice is never between responsibility and irresponsibility, between ethical or unethical behaviour, but only between 'different appropriations of the same sacrifice, different orders of responsibility, different other orders' (Derrida, 1995, 70).

In the same way, one can be responsible to a universal law ethical law or principle and thereby being irresponsible to a singular Other, or vice versa. We could think of Kant's famous categorical imperative, that amongst other things prohibits lying. An example that is commonly discussed is that of the man that is fleeing from someone who is trying to murder him. He hides in Kant's house. When the would-be killer comes at the door and asks if anyone happens to be hiding there, Kant of course does not lie and tells him exactly what he wants to know (*The Murderer at the Door: What Kant Should Have Said*, Michael Cholbi, 2009, 18). We can say that in this case, Kant's responsibility towards the categorical imperative, a general law, results in an irresponsibility towards the fleeing man, a singular Other. The story of Abraham could be an example of the opposite decision. He does not only sacrifice his son Isaac, but also his idea of ethics (Sheikh, 2013, 11). Essentially, God asks him to do something he considers wrong. His responsibility to God incites an irresponsibility towards the law (Derrida, 1995, 61).

This is why, according to Derrida, there can never be an ethical law that is absolute. The possibility that responsibility towards this law will have to be sacrificed for the sake of responsibility towards some singular Other. To put this problem more sharply; ethics always runs the risk of having to be 'sacrificed for the sake of duty' (Derrida, 1995, 67):

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. (Derrida, 1995, 68)

For every conception of duty, there could always be a counter-duty, the duty to put aside duty for an instance (Sheikh, 2013, 10). The sacrifice of one to the other, of that of the singular Other to the general law, can accordingly never be justified (Derrida, 1995, 70).

The secret

A secret is always something that is kept between people, from other people. A secret always entails some responsibility towards one singular Other that results in an irresponsibility towards all other Others. As such, a notion of secrecy cannot be incorporated into a general ethical law. As Derrida puts it, 'secrecy is intolerable for ethics' (Derrida, 1995, 62).

Derrida's notion of 'secret' extends beyond the common understanding of the word. It is not simply the case that a secret is something that is private but could be made public, something that one person knows and could communicate to others, but chooses not to. In the case of Abraham, it is not the case that he knows or understands something that he chooses not to communicate. In fact, he

does not know what God will do, or why he needs to kill his son, or if God is even there. There is no 'pact' between God and Abraham. Therefore, he does not know the secret that he keeps:

He must keep the secret (that is his duty), but it is also a secret that he must keep as a double necessity because in the end he can only keep it: he doesn't know it, he is unaware of its ultimate rhyme and reason. He is sworn to secrecy because he is in secret. Because, in this way, he doesn't speak, Abraham transgresses the ethical order. (Derrida, 1995, 59)

In this way, the secret is a condition for responsibility. The only way to navigate this continuous conflict between responsibility and irresponsibility towards various Others, is to keep secrets from them. We can imagine that the only way Abraham can interact with Isaac regarding his irresponsibility towards him is to keep the responsibility towards God to sacrifice him a secret.

This is not simply because if Abraham were to tell Isaac that he is going to kill him, Isaac would run from him. In order to carry out his duty to God, to be fully responsible to God, he must be irresponsible not only to Isaac, but also to morality itself. As this morality is embedded within language, as soon as Abraham would speak intelligibly, he would put himself in a relation to it. Imagine Abraham had said to Isaac: 'there is no lamb and we do not need one, for I will slaughter you'. He would have had to relate to the general law that the word 'slaughter' for instance carries traces of, namely that it is an evil thing to do to a person. In relation to this law, Abraham would have to admit that the thing God asked him to do would indeed be evil, that Isaac would be right in condemning both him and God for even planning it, and that if Isaac would take action to prevent it from happening he would be justified in doing so. In admitting all of this, Abraham would forfeit his responsibility to God as a singular Other for a responsibility to the law that is embedded in his language.

If he were to speak a common or translatable language, if he were to become intelligible by giving his reasons in a convincing manner, he would be giving in to the temptation of the ethical generality that I have referred to as that which makes one irresponsible. He wouldn't be Abraham any more, the unique Abraham in a singular relation with the unique God. (Derrida, 1995, 74)

To put this more generally, we always respond to an Other that is irreducibly singular, meaning that this Other can never be fully understood in general terms, but we can only do so in relation to the general laws that are embedded in our language. To be fully responsible towards one singular Other, one must respond and decide in a secret and silent manner, in a way that is purely singular. However, through language as a medium, that must always be iterable and therefore tied to the community, one cannot be purely singular (Sheikh, 2013, 11). As Derrida puts it:

The first effect or first destination of language therefore involves depriving me of, or delivering me from, my singularity. By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique. It is a very strange contract – both paradoxical and terrifying – that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secrecy. (Derrida, 1995, 60)

In order to be able to keep secrets and to be fully responsible towards a singular Other, one must be able to speak while remaining silent, be able to 'respond without responding'. For Derrida, 'the

literary' is the ability of language to remain forever undecidable in what it says, the possibility language offers to say something that does not have a clear decisive meaning. 'The literary' is not confined to literature in the common sense of the word, meaning a certain kind of book, but should be understood more broadly. A 'literary act' can be anything that is undetermined (Sheikh, 2013, 17). We can say that Abraham, in his 'response without response' to Isaac, engages in a literary act. As such, for Derrida, literature is the domain of the secret, as it is the literary aspect of language that enables the keeping of secrets. In *Resistances to Psychoanalysis*, Derrida describes Bartleby, who seems to exclusively respond without responding, accordingly as the 'secret of literature' (*Resistances to Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Derrida, 1998, 24).

The figure of Bartleby

What is Bartleby?

Having said all this, we can now see what position the story of Bartleby takes within the philosophy of Derrida. The 'secret of literature', or simply 'the secret', that he exemplifies in his 'response without response' can be seen as essential for any kind of (ir)responsibility within Derridean 'ethics', for it allows one to be responsible to a singular Other, to respond 'in a secret and silent manner'. What has not been discussed is the status, or perhaps the condition, of the figure of Bartleby himself. As Francesco Bigagli asks: 'What is Bartleby?' (*"And Who art Thou, Boy?": Face-to-Face with Bartleby; Or Levinas and the Other*, Francesco Bigagli, 2010, 37). Both Pinchevski and Bigagli regard Bartleby as a kind of Levinasian Other:

Bartleby's preference not to communicate can be read as signifying a radical kind of otherness, an irreconcilable alterity both displaced and displacing. Bartleby emerges as a species of the Levinasian Other: the face that resists possession and comprehension yet is silently calling for a responsible response. (Pinchevski, 2011, 38)

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" relates the traumatic friendship occasioned by the chance encounter between two strangers. More to the point, it is the story of self-discovery and love as the lawyer-narrator learns to respond to the Other beyond the conventional values of legalistic ethics, obligation, and justice. (Bigagli, 2010, 39)

Bartleby definitely resists understanding or incorporation into the Self of the narrator, unlike for instance his two other scribes Nippers and Turkey, who are little more than utensils to him (Bigagli, 2010, 39). But can Bartleby really be understood according to a Levinasian notion of the Other? For Levinas, the Other *always* resists possession and comprehension. This would lead us again to the question as to why Bartleby seems to be so particularly enigmatic. Imagine the narrator had instead encountered a homeless man on the street, asking for spare change. He would also have faced an Other that he could not fully comprehend, and an ultimately undecidable ethical decision of whether or not to be responsible towards that singular beggar.

In the case of Bartleby however, even when the narrator decides to sacrifice the ethical norm of his time by letting Bartleby stay in his office for instance, to the discomfort of himself and everyone else, or by even offering him his house to live in, this sacrifice *fails* in a sense. Not simply because Bartleby rejects it, in fact he doesn't as that would require a true response, but because Bartleby doesn't

seem to engage with him at all. The narrator again and again faces Bartleby's empty responses, in which he can discover not a trace of defiance, anger or any emotion whatsoever:

Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors. (Melville, 1856, 7).

Even at the end of the story, when Bartleby says 'I know you, and I want nothing to do with you' – which would by far be his most engaging response – the narrator makes no note of any outward sign of anger or resentment that would normally accompany such a sentence, only speaking of an 'implied suspicion' (Melville, 1856, 27).

Bartleby's 'response without response' takes the narrator through a range of different reactions, ranging from charitable attempts at helping him, to anger, stupefaction, fear, and confusion (Murray, 2008, 53). He attempts to interpret Bartleby in various ways, just like the one-and-a-half centuries worth of commentary that followed the story, but ultimately fails to settle on any definite understanding of him. In the case of Bartleby, the question seems not only to be about deciding between 'different orders of responsibility', or the form that this responsibility should take, but about the very possibility of responsibility towards the 'apparition' of Bartleby itself, about whether Bartleby is even there as an Other.

Bartleby as the silhouette of an Other

We can of course not say that Bartleby is simply not an Other for the narrator. If this were the case, the narrator would perceive him as a rock, a statue perhaps, that happens to be standing in his office but could be removed at will. It cannot be denied that he calls for a 'responsible response', he draws an endless flow of discourse towards himself. As Derrida remarks: 'without saying, he makes others speak' (Derrida, 1998, 24).

If we recall Derrida's criticism of Levinas, namely that in order to be respected and recognized as such, the Other must be conceived of (or rather, believed in) as a transcendental ego through testimony, we can perhaps shed a different light on the case of Bartleby. The figure of Bartleby is comparable to that of Abraham, as they both respond without responding. A difference however is that where Abraham is irresponsible towards Isaac, this irresponsibility stands in relation to a responsibility towards God, Bartleby's irresponsibility does not seem to relate to any form of responsibility at all. Unlike Abraham, Bartleby seems to exclusively 'respond without responding'. In this way, it seems Bartleby is irresponsible towards everyone, and in that way perhaps irresponsible (or responsible) to no one.

As a 'response without a response' cannot be an affirmation or a negation of anything, which excludes any implicit affirmation of subjective experience that would be required for a response to be a testimony. As Bartleby only responds without responding, he does not testify and in that also does not seem to commit to any act of faith by which he could engage with the testimonial language of the narrator. Bartleby does not say 'here I am' (Derrida, 1995, 71) or 'I believe you' (Morin, 2007, 177), and thus seems to undermine the very possibility for the narrator to form any kind of

relationship with him. Just as his phrase 'I would prefer not to' is 'haunted by the silhouette of content', can we say that the figure of Bartleby is haunted by the silhouette of testimony, the silhouette of Otherness, rather than being a full-fledged Other? In this sense, Otherness would not be compromised by Sameness, but rather to nonexistence, to the absence of a transcendental ego. Indeed, the narrator on multiple occasions compares Bartleby to an inanimate object.

In regards to the Otherness of Bartleby, there seems to be the same undecidedness and seeming contradiction similar to the one that lies in the notion of 'response without response' itself. Does the 'response without response' relate to the laws embedded within language because it is uttered, or does it not relate to them because nothing is said? Is it even possible to speak, and Bartleby does speak, without being 'encountered in language' and thus to be fully conceived of as an Other? Is it even a language that he speaks, or rather a 'nonlanguage'? Could he therefore be regarded as a 'being without language' (Derrida, 2005, 135) that for Derrida cannot be part of his 'economy' of Otherness?

If we return to the story itself, Bartleby's job as a scrivener might be a good case study here. A scrivener copies legal documents by hand, while not necessarily understanding them or engaging with them in any way, being essentially a human copying machine. Bartleby's aptness for copying, which he performs 'palely, mechanically' (Melville, 1856, 6), might be taken as a hint for how he interacts with language. Some lines by Bartleby appear to be at least in part echolalic, in that they repeat part of the sentence the narrator has just said to him. Think of the narrator saying: 'say now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable', to which Bartleby replies: 'at present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable' (Melville, 1856, 16).

In a sense, the language of echolalia could be taken as a kind of nonlanguage, in that it in its 'purest' form cannot be engaged with as it does not carry with it any promise of truthfulness. In this way, it is impossible to encounter an Other within echolalia. It would be absurd to say that we can have a serious conversation with a tape recorder for instance.

Autism

Lastly, I will discuss to what extent we can characterize Bartleby as 'autistic', and to what interpretation of 'autism' this would lead us. Of course it is not possible to know what it is 'inside' of Bartleby that causes him to behave in the way he does. As said before, it is very well possible that he is dedicated – responsible – to some motive that remains unspoken, as would be the case if we are to follow the Marxist reading of Kuebrich for instance. Derrida himself seems to think in a similar direction, as he speaks of Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' as a 'sacrificial passion'. This does seem to imply that Bartleby is sacrificing something to something else, which would imply that he is responsible to that something else.

Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" is also a sacrificial passion that will lead him to death, a death given by the law, by a society that doesn't even know why it acts the way it does. (Derrida, 1995, 75)

However, if Bartleby indeed responds to no one, and in turn also does not engage with the responses of Others, in short if he does not engage in language at all, what can we say about his perceived 'autism'?

If Bartleby does not engage with Others in language, he cannot have any sense of Self (Morin, 2007, 169). This notion of autism would be similar to that of Christopher Bollas in the sense that it takes the sense of 'Self' of Bartleby to be compromised. However, this 'absence of Self' does not have to imply any form of loss, need, pain or disillusionment. In fact, Bartleby's Selfless, Otherless autism could be a way to 'escape' (or rather, never to face) the terrifying undecidability of ethics, in which we are always bound to make a sacrifice that we cannot justify.

In regards to the question what could have 'caused' Bartleby to be in this state, we can of course never be certain. However, what we can say about it is that it would be impossible to reach this state by choice. If I had (mis)read Derrida's work on ethics, and had come to the conclusion that the only way to escape sacrificing all Others to one singular Other would be to 'become' fully irresponsible, I would simply be responsible towards that one idea, that one notion, and would be sacrificing my responsibility towards all 'other orders' to it. The only way I could be fully non-responsible is if it had *never occurred* to me to be responsible towards anything or anyone, to ever say 'I believe you'. In other words, if I would have never engaged with anything as an Other or with myself as a Self. If I, like Bartleby is described by the narrator, I would indeed be 'completely alone in the universe' (Melville, 1856, 18).

As this form of 'Derridean autism' must be a 'given condition', to indeed call it 'autism' would take us rather close to how the term is used in psychology, namely as static, innate disorder that involves a compromised relation to others. In that sense the use of the term could be justified.

Conclusion

In regards to Derrida's concept of Otherness, as opposed to that of Levinas, Bartleby can be understood as autistic, if we take this to mean that he does not decidedly testify of his own subjective experience or engages with the testimonies of others, as he only 'responds without a responding'. In this way, he undermines the 'act of faith' by which others can decide to 'believe' in him as a transcendental ego.

To understand autism in this way within the context of the work of Derrida leads away from both a notion of autism as a form of incommunicability as opposed to 'unproblematic communication', and perhaps more importantly, away from an interpretation of at least Bartleby's autism as resulting from a form of 'loss' or 'need'. Instead, his autism can be viewed as a Selfless, Otherless kind of 'being', that allows him to 'escape' having to make sacrifices that will always be unjustifiable due to the fundamental undecidability of (ir)responsibility.

This can be considered as a possible explanation for his apparent enigmatic character. To interpret the figure of Bartleby as autistic in this sense can open up a new way of reading the story that is different from most existing readings, in that it does not attempt to find what 'motivates' Bartleby's perceived 'passive resistance', but rather focusses on his ambiguous and problematic status as an Other.

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