

## Derrida and Democracy at Risk

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Democracy today is at risk. At risk from its enemies, the so-called ‘enemies of freedom’ —the dictators, terrorists, and religious fundamentalists who want to prevent democracy from coming to pass in certain regions of the world, and want to end its reign elsewhere, most notably in the West. This supposed truth is broadcast daily via the media, and constitutes the primary justification given by governments for the two most immediate and obvious consequences of the attacks of September 11. For both the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the restrictions in personal liberties and rights (on the freedom of movement, the restrictions in immigration laws, and increased governmental and internal police powers) that have been imposed across the world, have taken place in the name of ‘security’, in the name of defending democracy against its enemies.

However, the threats to democracy do not only come from its others. For as is also claimed in the media with a much lesser, though not negligible, frequency, these governmental responses themselves *also* put democracy at risk. The invasion of Iraq took place in the face of what seemed to be majority opposition from the populations of the two countries who led it, and the restriction of personal freedom in the name of security can be seen to attack the very liberty upon which democracy is founded. One might claim that in such actions these governments are themselves harming democracy, perhaps even to an extent greater than any ‘terrorist’ could hope to achieve.

Thus, while it is difficult to deny that democracy today is at risk, there is some question as to what are the sources of this danger. If one admits that at least one of these sources is ‘internal’ (that at least part of the risk comes from democratic governments themselves), then one is left to wonder what this means for our understanding of democracy. Is there something inherent in democracy that leads it to put itself at risk?

In his recent essay “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?),” Jacques Derrida answers this question in the affirmative.<sup>1</sup> Derrida argues that democratic governments are putting democracy at risk. In doing so they are acting according to a possibility that is essential to the very concept of democracy itself. At the centre of

this argument we find a relatively new term in Derrida's lexicon, "auto-immunity," which describes the contradictory process in which a self puts a partial end to itself in order to live on. In the case of democracy, Derrida's claim is that we see this process at work precisely in those moments when democracy is under attack. For example, with respect to the restriction of personal liberties that followed September 11, Derrida argues that democracy is indeed attacking a part of itself, but it does so in the name of protecting itself, claiming that such restrictions are necessary for democracy as a whole to survive the external threats of rogue states or Al-Qaeda. Derrida's point is that this process of auto-immunity is not somehow extrinsic to democracy, something which we could avoid if we were just a bit more democratic. Rather, he argues that this logic is inescapable—democracy realizes itself, for better and for worse, according to a process of auto-immunity. Democracy is, therefore, essentially at risk, and the risk comes as much from itself as from its 'enemies'.

In this paper I articulate the implicit logic of auto-immunity in order to demonstrate how Derrida arrives at this vision of democracy at risk. At the same time, I aim to show that Derrida's use of the term 'auto-immunity' is not itself without a certain risk. For one of the consequences of understanding democracy as auto-immune is the implication that democracy is fundamentally structured around the notion of defense. This is, I suggest, a vision of democracy that we might not want to endorse.

### **Religion and auto-immunity**

I will begin with a brief account of Derrida's first substantial use of the term 'auto-immunity' which takes place in the essay "Faith and Knowledge: The two sources of 'religion' at the limits of reason alone."<sup>2</sup> In this text Derrida diagnoses one of the two sources of religion as being "the unscathed [*l'indemne*]" (while the other is "faith"). But in spite of its name, Derrida argues that the unscathed—"the safe and sound, the immune, the holy, the sacred, *heilig*"<sup>3</sup>—is anything but pure. This follows from the relationship that the unscathed has to iterability.<sup>4</sup> In its very attempt to secure the sacred as sacred (and to establish the security in faith), religion is led to iterate itself, to give itself over to a repetitive duplicity that further divides its already doubled self at the source. "Why should there always have to be *more than one* source?... *there are at least two*. Because there are, for the best and for the worst, division and iterability of the source."<sup>5</sup> Derrida illustrates this iterability by examining religion's engagement with technology—it's use of and dependence on mechanical reproduction.<sup>6</sup> Religions today have recourse to technology in order to disperse their message to an astonishing extent: "the multiplicity, the unprecedented speed and scope of the moves of a Pope versed in televisual rhetoric... airborne pilgrimages to Mecca... the international and televisual diplomacy of the Dalai Lama, etc."<sup>7</sup> Such phenomena testify to the necessity of technology for the health of world

religions in our time. World religion needs technology to survive. At the same time, this necessity necessarily undermines their health. Derrida argues that religion, insofar as it aims at the purity of the unscathed, must simultaneously oppose itself to the repetition in technological reproduction. In their necessary mechanization, world religions touch the untouchable, corrupt the pure, and reduce the sacred to the profane. Thus in showing itself to be dependent on mechanical repetition, which for Derrida is always associated with a kind of *death* (“the tele-technoscientific machine, this enemy of life”<sup>8</sup>), the *life* of that which should be independent (religion understood as a relation to the sacred) is threatened. Derrida’s claim is that religions must die a little, in truth, *put themselves to death* a little, in order to keep themselves alive.

It is this process, the putting-a-part-of-itself-to-death in order to stay alive, that Derrida names auto-immunity:

The same movement that renders indissociable religion and tele-technoscientific reason in its most critical aspect reacts inevitably *to itself*. It secretes its own antidote but also its own power of auto-immunity. We are here in a space where all self-protection of the unscathed, of the safe and sound, of the sacred (*heilig*, holy) must protect itself against its own protection, its own police, its own power of rejection, in short against its own [*son propre tout court*], which is to say, against its own immunity. It is this terrifying but fatal logic of the *auto-immunity of the unscathed* that will always associate Science and Religion.<sup>9</sup>

This passage constitutes Derrida’s first lengthy discussion of auto-immunity.<sup>10</sup> Yet already in the introduction of this term is an ambiguity regarding its definition. This ambiguity lies in the simultaneous restriction *and* lack of restriction in Derrida’s application of the term. On the one hand, Derrida argues that auto-immunity is a process whereby a religion attacks those parts of itself that can be considered parts of its own immune system. In this way he remains faithful to what he claims are the biological sources of this term: “It is especially in the domain of biology that the lexical resources of immunity have developed their authority... the process of auto-immunization... consists for a living organism, as is well known and in short, of protecting itself against its self-protection by destroying its own immune system.”<sup>11</sup> This limits auto-immunity to the phenomenon of a self’s protection against its own immune system. On the other hand, Derrida seems to presuppose a broader definition of auto-immunity. For in claiming that religion protects itself ‘in short against its own’, Derrida implies that auto-immunity involves an attack against *any* part of the self, any aspect that can be properly called its own, whether part of its defense system or not. There is thus an ambiguity here between whether we should understand auto-immunity as self defense (and therefore attack) against one’s own defense system (a part of itself), or as a defense (and again attack) against any part of itself.

I take this ambiguity seriously, and not just an oversight on Derrida’s part. What does it tell us about the auto-immune process? How can we understand the double claim that an entity attacks only a specific part of itself *and* any part of itself? The answer is that in

arguing that religion is inseparable from the figure of the unscathed, together with the fact that, in the end, the unscathed just means the *proper* itself, Derrida implies that every aspect of religion serves to shore up and protect this propriety. This is not to say that religions are fully successful in protecting this propriety. Religions never fully coincide with the unscathed, for their purity is always corrupted. But in Derrida's account every part of religion nevertheless aims towards this purity. That is, any part of religion is rightly seen as a part of its defense, since religion is centrally oriented towards the protection of the sacred, the maintaining-sacred of the sacred. Effectively, Derrida is presenting religion *as* defense. In this way Derrida can argue both that auto-immunity protects against the self's own defense systems, and that auto-immunity protects against the self as a whole—for the entirety of this whole is involved in defense. This is not to say that the operation of auto-immunity destroys *all* of the defense systems *at once*. If this were the case, religion would annihilate itself without remainder, and there would be no survival of which to speak. Such a situation might better be called 'auto-destruction', which, while being a valid term to use in other discussions, does not pick out the specificity of the phenomenon that Derrida here wants to describe. Auto-immunity is a process of a *localized* putting-to-death, even while any part of the whole has the potential of being attacked. It is through this process of a limited putting-to-death that the greater whole lives on.

### **Democracy and auto-immunity**

While "Faith and Knowledge" thus introduces 'auto-immunity' into Derrida's work, it is only in "La Raison du Plus Fort" that this notion is extensively deployed. This later essay is clearly marked by its date. First delivered in July 2002, it speaks of rogue states, fissures in the concept of sovereignty, restricted freedoms, and the problems of democracy—all the elements that paint a picture of democracy at risk. The guiding thread of the essay is that ancient yet so modern problem—the impossibility of reconciling liberty and equality. The politico-philosophical tradition, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, is consistent in defining democracy as that regime in which the people are free to govern themselves as they wish. But the fact that the 'people' are a plural entity, that they are always more than one, entails that democracy also immediately implies a reference to equality, such that each person is free in an equal measure. Democracy therefore calls both for liberty and equality, in truth for equal liberty, and from this point unfold so many of the challenges that present themselves to political philosophy.

Derrida's own take on this problem is to argue that the tension between liberty and equality can be understood according to a relation between the calculable and the incalculable:

This antinomy at the heart of the democratic, recognized for a long time and classic

and canonic, is that of the constitutive and diabolical couple of democracy: liberty and equality. This I would translate into my language by saying that equality tends to introduce measure and calculation (thus conditionality) there where liberty is by essence unconditional, indivisible, heterogeneous to calculation and to measure.<sup>12</sup>

This passage juxtaposes a calculable equality with an incalculable liberty at the heart of democracy, a picture Derrida will immediately complicate in arguing that equality itself shares in this incalculability.<sup>13</sup> But this complication does not dispel the fundamental tension between liberty and equality. How might we attempt to realize that which seems essential to democracy, liberty and equality? Aristotle's solution, which will orient the rest of Derrida's discussion, is the proposal whereby each governs in turn, a taking-in-turns [*tour à tour*], such that citizens are sometimes governing and sometimes governed. In Derrida's words, "liberty and equality are only reconcilable in a roundabout and alternative manner, in alternance; the absolute freedom of a finite being (it is of this finitude that we speak here) is equally divisible [*partageable*] only in the space-time of a taking-in-turns."<sup>14</sup> The choice to curtail personal liberty in order to safeguard democratic equality through a system of alternating governance acts, Derrida notes, rather like a free wheel spinning.<sup>15</sup> This resolution of the problem is clearly a compromise—not only is liberty limited, but the kind of equality allowed in a strict incarnation of a taking-in-turns (whereby each citizen has a turn at governing, regardless of their personal qualities) is only equality according to number, and not equality according to merit. Modern democratic incarnations of this alternance, whereby governments change through a process of regular elections, can perhaps be viewed as an attempt to better incorporate both these kinds of equality—equality according to number preserved in an (idealized) equal right to vote for candidates to be judged (again, ideally) according to merit. But such models still, even in their idealized form, fail to fully respect both liberty and (each kind of) equality. Liberty remains restricted, and equality, in part incalculable on Derrida's reading, remains in the sphere of the calculable.

The conclusion that Derrida draws from this compromise through alternance is that there is a radical indetermination in the very concept of democracy. He thus repeats what is essentially Plato's critique of democracy in *The Republic*:

[O]ne would seek in vain a single constitution, a single *politeia* in this democracy peopled by such a large diversity of men. Delivered to liberty, to *exousia* this time, democracy contains every type of constitution, regime or State... Plato announces already that 'democracy', at base, is neither the name of a regime nor the name of a constitution, of one constitutionality among others.<sup>16</sup>

The free spinning of a democracy operating through a taking-in-turns opens it up to an essential indetermination, whereby many different forms of government can come to pass. This, Derrida suggests, may account for the fact that such a wide variety of governments

across the world—socialist, religious, secular, parliamentary, presidential, communist... can today call themselves democratic.<sup>17</sup> There is no single model that can stand for the form of democracy.

Derrida's twist on the Platonic critique is to view this indetermination as a mark of democracy's essential hospitality—in its lack of form democracy welcomes all kinds of government. And, as is always the case for Derrida, this hospitality extends to a welcoming of both the best *and* the worst. Or, to use a formula not quite equivalent, the essential absence at work in the concept of democracy creates both a chance *and* a threat.<sup>18</sup> It is here that Derrida sees the process of auto-immunity. The chance is located in the fact that democracy's lack of form opens it up to the possibility of bettering itself. This openness to change is one of the reasons Derrida gives for his use of the phrase "democracy to come."

The expression "democracy to come" takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system which welcomes into itself, in its concept, this formula of auto-immunity that one calls the right to autocritique and to perfectibility. Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm in which, in principle, one has or one takes the right to publicly criticise everything, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history and its name. Including the idea of the constitutional paradigm and the absolute authority of the law. It is therefore alone in being universalisable, and from this comes its chance and its fragility.<sup>19</sup>

Democracy's lack of definition means that it has the chance of evolving into a better regime. This is an auto-immune process insofar as it involves democracy's putting an end to certain parts of itself so as to replace them with aspects more democratic. Note that this is not quite an exact repetition of the definition of auto-immunity given in "Faith and Knowledge." Derrida here appeals to only one side of the ambiguity that I have argued inhabits this notion—the broader definition of auto-immunity in which what is at stake is an attack against *any* part of the self. There is no mention or suggestion here that what is under attack constitutes more specifically a part of the self's defense system. We will continue to see the avoidance of this more particular definition throughout "La Raison du Plus Fort," and I will discuss its significance towards the end of this paper. For now, I want to leave this to one side in order to follow the logic of Derrida's analysis of democracy.

Returning to the passage above, we see that democracy's essential hospitality provides it with the chance of perfecting itself through the process of auto-immunity. Yet, as this passage also states, this very chance is inseparable from democracy's fragility. For democracy's openness to change—its hospitality—also exposes it to the threat of 'others' who wish to put it to an end. The alternance of democracy through a taking-in-turns can always, Derrida argues, pass over into an alternative that opposes itself to democracy. "The great question of modern representative and parliamentary democracy, but perhaps of all democracy, is, in the logic of the turn, of the other turn, of the other

time and therefore of the other, of the *alter* in general, that the *alternative to* democracy can always be *represented* as a democratic *alternance*.”<sup>20</sup> To make this point Derrida appeals to the case of Algeria in 1992, where elections were interrupted in the face of the perceived threat that they would result in the formation of a fundamentalist Islamic government. If this result had come to pass, and the subsequent government indeed introduced anti-democratic laws as imagined (something, as Derrida notes, we will never know), then it would have been the case that democracy democratically passed over into an anti-democratic regime. Derrida suggests that the arrival to power of fascist and Nazi regimes should also be considered in these terms.<sup>21</sup>

Derrida labels this kind of situation ‘auto-immune’ for the possibility of this attack comes from within itself. It is thus unclear in this situation to what extent those ‘others’ who would want to pass anti-democratic laws are indeed ‘other’ — we cannot so easily delineate democracy from its ‘enemies’, since the latter here arrive with some democratic legitimacy. And importantly, they do not come out of nowhere. Derrida inscribes this example of an auto-immune ‘moment’ in Algeria into a history of similar actions, arguing that it is a part of “a series of linked examples of an auto-immune pervertibility of democracy” in which the imposition of a colonising power identifying itself as a democracy produces “exactly the opposite of democracy (French Algeria), which itself produces a civil war, later named a war of independence seen to be fought in the name of the very democratic principles that the colonising power first proclaimed.”<sup>22</sup> This example belongs to a long historical chain.

Equally important is that fact that this chain also extends into the future. In the face of the perceived threat of Islamic fundamentalism, democracy attacked itself through the suspension of elections: “the Algerian government and an important, while non-majority, part of the Algerian people (in truth of peoples foreign to Algeria)... thus preferred to put an end [to democracy] themselves. They sovereignly decided to suspend democracy, at least provisionally, *for its own good* and in order to take care of it, to immunise it against the worse and more probable aggression.”<sup>23</sup> Here too we have an example of auto-immunity at work — democracy attacks a part of itself (in this case elections) in order to allow itself as a whole to live on. So the response that was made to the projected threat to democracy from Islamic fundamentalism may have averted this particular danger (at least in the short term), but it did not prevent democracy from being attacked. An attack still took place, one that was seen to be a form of defense against what was perceived to be an even greater threat.

Thus the case of Algeria provides an example of the workings of auto-immunity in democracy (but to repeat a point I have already made, here and throughout “La Raison du Plus Fort” it is a question of the broader definition of auto-immunity, in which there is no explicit mention of democracy attacking its own defense system). A democracy makes possible the threat of an attack against itself from certain ‘others’, and its response to this threat is to attack itself. A second example that Derrida uses to demonstrate the same kind of phenomenon is the event of the attacks of September 11:

[I]t is perhaps because the United States lives in a culture and according to a law largely democratic that it was able to open itself and expose its greatest vulnerability to immigrants, for example to apprentice pilots, “terrorists” experienced and themselves suicidal who, before turning against the others and also against themselves the very aerial bombs they became, before launching them in launching themselves against the two towers of the WTC, were trained on the sovereign territory of the United States, under the nose of the CIA and the FBI, perhaps not without some auto-immune consent from an Administration at the same time more or less unforeseeing than one believes before a supposedly unforeseeable and major event.<sup>24</sup>

This example is of a slightly different nature to that of the Algerian elections, since it is not a question here of democracy’s openness to a plurality of forms of government (which follows from its essential indetermination). Rather, the root of the problem lies more simply in democracy’s openness to others, which is linked to the movement of universalization inherent in democracy’s perfectibility. Derrida’s claim is that the United States was being democratic in exposing itself to the threat that became September 11, through its relatively open borders and training of those who were to turn against it. Thus, in spite of the difference in the kind of openness involved, what is common to both September 11 and the Algerian elections is the fact that the threat can be seen to be arising as a possibility internal to democracy.

Further, there are strong parallels between these two cases regarding the location of the threat in a historical chain. In the case of September 11 there is a long history which could also be described as “a series of linked examples of an auto-immune pervertibility of democracy,” in which the troops trained by the United States to fight against what is seen to be the anti-democratic threat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan return to attack these same United States.<sup>25</sup> This again has the consequence of making difficult any clear distinction between democracy and its ‘others’, since these ‘others’ are in many ways the product of democracy itself. And here too this long history of auto-immunity also extends into the future. For after September 11

...we see an American administration... which, claiming to set off on a war against the ‘axis of evil’, against the enemies of liberty and against the assassins of democracy in the world, must inevitably and undeniably restrain, in its own country, the said democratic liberties or exercise of rights, through extending the powers of police inquisition, etc.<sup>26</sup>

The perceived threat to the democracy of the United States (this time in the form of the threat of attacks even worse than September 11) leads this democracy to attack a part of itself (the suspension of certain democratic rights and liberties) in order to ensure its survival. The United States attacks a part of itself in order to defend itself against attacks that are imagined to come in the future from a source imagined to be other and more



dangerous than itself.

Thus for Derrida auto-immunity is at work in both of the examples of the Algerian elections in 1992 and in the attacks of September 11. In both cases Derrida interprets the perceived danger, and the response to this danger, as part of a process of auto-immunity. Democracy contains within it the possibility of welcoming an undemocratic regime, and of inviting (and to some extent encouraging) terrorist attacks, as well as the possibility of producing another attack against itself in an attempt to divert these threats. Derrida expresses this operation in more theoretical terms by reinvigorating a notion that has worked throughout his writings for many years, that of *renvoyer*—re-sending: a sending away, sending back (to the source), and/or sending on. In particular, Derrida emphasizes the spatial and temporal dimensions of this sending which operate in democracy's process of auto-immunity. First, "in space, the auto-immune topology always commands to re-send [*renvoyer*] democracy elsewhere, to expel or to reject it, to exclude it under the pretext of protecting it on the inside in exiling [*renvoyant*], rejecting, excluding to the outside the domestic enemies of democracy."<sup>27</sup> Democracy thus protects itself by sending its *domestic* enemies (reinforcing the point that these enemies are internal to democracy itself) into exile. This reflex is a reaction against (or, more accurately, simply the other side of) the hospitality that Derrida has diagnosed as being an essential part of democracy, and is well illustrated in the modifications to immigration and naturalization policies made by governments around the world after September 11. Second, "the re-sending [*renvoi*] operating also in time, auto-immunity imposes equally to *put off* [*renvoyer*] until later elections and the coming of democracy."<sup>28</sup> Here, the sending operates temporally through delaying democratic reforms and elections until the times are 'safer' for democracy. This was the case in Algeria in 1992, and can perhaps accurately describe what is taking place in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq today, where elections are continually deferred in the name of protecting democracy in the long term.

Derrida argues that the operation of these re-sendings reinforce the Platonic insight described above that is one of the central claims of his analysis, namely that there is no essence to democracy, no self that democracy can properly be:

This double re-sending (re-sending of—or to—the other and adjournment) is an auto-immune fatality inscribed *directly in* democracy [*à même la démocratie*], *directly in* the concept of a democracy without concept, *directly in* a democracy deprived of sameness and of ipseity, of a democracy of which the concept remains free, out of gear, *free-wheeling*, in the free play of its indetermination, directly in this thing or this cause which, precisely, under the name of democracy, is never properly that which it is, never *itself*. It is the proper meaning, the meaning itself of the same (*ipse, metipse, metipsissimus, meisme, même*), it is the itself, the same, the properly same of the itself which is lacking in democracy. It defines democracy, and the very ideal of democracy, by this lack of the proper and of the same.<sup>29</sup>

With these words, Derrida invites a comparison of his diagnosis of the auto-immunity

at work in democracy with his analysis of religion in “Faith and Knowledge.” For at stake is democracy’s *propriety*, and Derrida is arguing, as was the case with religion, that through its auto-immunity democracy undermines any possibility it has of ever being proper to itself. Auto-immunity is not only a process by which democracy attacks a part of itself—this process calls into question the very notion of democracy’s identity.

Thus, starting from the irresolvable tension between liberty and equality, and the compromise solution of the taking-in-turns, Derrida diagnoses an auto-immune process that is always at work in democracy, a process that puts democracy constantly at risk. Democracy risks putting parts of itself to death, for example through making possible the democratic election of anti-democratic governments, through welcoming and training those who will become its ‘enemies’, and through suspending aspects of itself in an attempt to ward off these very dangers. Derrida’s claim is that this process of auto-immunity is not extrinsic to democracy, something unfortunate that befalls it or that interrupts its proper development. For this propriety is precisely what democracy lacks, and as a consequence the chance of democracy can always pass over into its threat.

### **The risks of auto-immunity**

Auto-immunity allows Derrida to theorize the dangers threatening contemporary democracies. It is in exploiting this term that Derrida’s analysis attains its level of complexity and sophistication. Further, in its links with other important Derridean notions such as hospitality, re-sending, and the proper, as well as its connotations of life and death, Derrida’s use of auto-immunity in “La Raison du Plus Fort” calls for us to explore in more depth the implications of this process at work in democracy. It would therefore be productive to examine this term more comprehensively not only in the light of so many other Derridean texts, but also in relation to other contemporary philosophers of life and politics such as Agamben, Badiou, Deleuze and Foucault. I will not here pursue these links, as promising as they are. Instead I wish to return to a point I have already raised several times in passing, namely that in “La Raison du Plus Fort,” Derrida uses a very broad definition of auto-immunity that corresponds to only one side of the ambiguity at work in “Faith and Knowledge.”

Recall the definition of auto-immunity given in “Faith and Knowledge.” There Derrida seems to hesitate between using this term to describe an attack by an entity against a part of its immune system, and an attack by an entity against any part of itself. I argued that we can make sense of this ambiguity without privileging one definition over the other by considering the relationship between religion and the unscathed. Because Derrida claims that religion always pursues purity, one can view every part of religion as attempting to safeguard this purity—every part of religion can be seen as a part of its defense. In this way any attack against a part of religion is an attack against a part of its defenses. This

holds even though Derrida maintains that religions will never be successful in their pursuit of purity, that they never are fully proper. All this argument needs is the claim that every aspect of religion is *devoted* to the attempt, not that every aspect is *in fact successful*.

With respect to “La Raison du Plus Fort,” I have claimed that Derrida only uses auto-immunity insofar as it refers to an attack by democracy against any part of itself. This is not to say that the more restricted definition of auto-immunity is not mentioned. In the middle of his discussion of the Algerian elections, Derrida writes that “I have tried to formalise the general law of the auto-immune process that I am describing in ‘Faith and Knowledge’,” referring the reader to this text.”<sup>30</sup> Later, when returning to the implications of auto-immunity for conceptions of the proper, Derrida states in passing that “the auto-immune does not only consist in harming oneself or in ruining oneself, in truth in destroying one’s own [*propre*] protection... auto-immunity always threatens to deprive suicide itself of its meaning and its supposed integrity.”<sup>31</sup> These remarks suggest that Derrida himself considers the more restricted definition, whereby what is under attack is a part of the immune system, to still apply in “La Raison du Plus Fort.” But as we have seen in Derrida’s actual analyses of Algeria and September 11, that is, in his actual use of auto-immunity, this definition seems not to be in play. Auto-immunity only ever refers to a phenomenon of self-attack in general.<sup>32</sup>

In short, Derrida seems rather careless, or at the very least rather relaxed in the way he uses the notion of auto-immunity in his analysis of democracy. He says it means one thing, but uses it so as to suggest that it means another. Is this a problem? Certainly, to the extent that one demands a certain level of rigour in Derrida’s writings (a rigour I do not think is at all out of the question from his own point of view). But my complaint does not simply follow from a demand for consistency. After all, why not let Derrida use auto-immunity as he pleases? Why not just accept the definition given in “Faith and Knowledge” as revised in “La Raison du Plus Fort”? Derrida has never claimed that concepts remain static, nor that they have a stable identity outside of their context of use. On the contrary. And yet, if we ignore Derrida’s own references in “La Raison du Plus Fort” to the definition of auto-immunity given in “Faith and Knowledge,” and argue from its use that this definition has changed, then something important will have been lost. If auto-immunity only means a process by which a self attacks a part of itself, we do not seem to learn anything particularly insightful or new. Further, why then call this auto-immunity? Why not simply choose another name, since the biological roots of this term would henceforth be ignored? The emphasis placed on the fact that it is the self’s immune system that is under attack promises an original analysis of democracy. It promises a genuinely new understanding of democracy’s risk. If we let this emphasis disappear, then I fear we destroy almost all of this promise.<sup>33</sup>

There are thus good reasons for insisting on a more rigorous application of auto-immunity to democracy. However, the pursuit of the full implications of auto-immunity in democracy is not without its own risks. It gives rise to a potentially negative consequence which, by way of conclusion, I wish to briefly examine.

Consider the implications of understanding the auto-immune process in democracy

as an attack against democracy's own defenses, and not just as an attack against any part of democracy. In the cases that Derrida discusses, Algeria and September 11, this would entail viewing the suspension of elections and the the restrictions upon freedom as part of democracy's immune system. These elements would thereby be seen to be not just parts of democracy, but parts of democracy's defense. Their purpose would be to protect democracy as such. Does this provide a plausible or useful interpretation of democracy? I am not so sure that it does. For why should we view an election as that which *protects* democracy, as opposed to being that which democracy *should* protect? Or view the citizens excluded from democracy as being an integral part of the democratic immune system, as opposed to those whom the immune system is committed to defend? Likewise for democratic freedom itself.

Deciding between these options depends upon an interpretation: there is no necessity that would force us to promote one over the other. But my worry is that if we choose the interpretation entailed by an analysis turning on auto-immunity (in its strict definition), we will be choosing a vision of democracy that, at its limit, sees every part of democracy as being devoted to its defense. This conjures up an image of democracy as a form of militarized totality, in which all its workings, its citizens, and their rights are implicated in its own protection. Democracy would thereby be a political regime fundamentally structured around a notion of defense. This is indeed one way to see things, and is perhaps a vision that some of those with the most (democratic) power today share. But is it one that ought to be promoted?

Of course, this picture of an entity wholly devoted to its own defense is precisely what I have argued was behind Derrida's view of religion. But there it is a consequence of the relationship between religion and the unscathed—it seemed therefore to be an inevitable part of what religion is all about, at least on Derrida's account. There is nothing in our understanding of democracy, as vague as it may be, that *necessitates* the unscathed as one of its sources. Democracy rarely pledges itself to the pure, in theory and in practice, at least in the way Derrida thinks that religion is committed to the unscathed. When it does, there is, I would suggest, a kind of fascism or totalitarianism at work in democracy. This tendency is precisely what Derrida wants to resist, precisely why he speaks of a democracy 'to come' which is open to its own change and transformation.<sup>34</sup> Presupposing that democracy pursues the pure so as to justify a vision of democracy as defense therefore is at odds with Derrida's own project.

The problem with using auto-immunity to diagnose democracy at risk is that it commits us to a picture in which democracy is fundamentally structured around a notion of defense, and this may not be the kind of democracy that ought to be endorsed. This is not so much a criticism as it is a caution, since it is more about our future uses of auto-immunity than about those already made. With respect to what Derrida has already published, I stand by my original criticism. His use of auto-immunity to analyze democracy remains for me too general and too vague, ignoring the more precise definition he himself still seems to hold, and thus misses out on some of the power that this notion proffers. But if we attempt to take advantage of this power, and keep auto-immunity in a more rigorous

play, we also run a certain risk. We risk presenting a vision of a militarized democracy, in which all of its aspects—its citizens, its laws, its rights and its elections—are devoted to its defense.

This is not to say that what this risk predicts will certainly come to pass. We might be able to be more subtle in our ascription of auto-immunity, perhaps refraining from seeing it in operation every time there is an attack against democracy, even an attack that comes from itself. This would not be to suspend the use of auto-immunity as a term of analysis altogether. For instance, it seems very appropriate in characterizing the way certain democratic reforms take place, reforms that would fall under what Derrida calls democracy's right to auto-critique and perfectibility. Thus, in the expansion of the right to vote, the previous exclusion of, say, women from this right seems precisely structured according to a logic that aims to defend democracy from what are seen to be dangerous elements. Overcoming this exclusion therefore would be an excellent example of democracy attacking its own defenses. But this would be to use auto-immunity in a limited fashion—to give it a place in our understanding of democracy, just not the kind of centrality and reach that Derrida wants it to have.

Auto-immunity is still a very new term in Derrida's lexicon, and is no doubt still in development. It is likely that it will appear again (although this is by no means certain), and we do not yet know how it will be used in this possible future. I am a little wary of this future, but I may well be wrong in holding this somewhat pessimistic view. Much will depend on what is to come in Derrida's theorizing of democracy and auto-immunity, both in the texts that will appear under his signature and in those from readers in response.

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## Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, "La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)," *Voyou* (Paris: Galilée, 2003). All translations of this text are mine. The interview entitled "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas, *Philosophy in the Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003) is a companion piece of sorts to "La Raison du Plus Fort," since the themes of the two texts are extremely close, to the point where a part of the essay (pp. 122-125) appears word for word (at least in translation) in the interview (pp. 134-135). However, in what follows, I have chosen to concentrate on "La Raison du Plus Fort" for I find it to be more theoretically rich and developed than "Auto-immunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides."
2. Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).
3. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge" 93.

4. In addition to appealing to iterability, Derrida also argues for the impurity of the unscathed in claiming that, even though the two sources “should never be confused or reduced to one another as is almost always done” (Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 70), each of these sources nonetheless “already reflects and presupposes the other” (Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 93).
5. Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 100.
6. Derrida also gives an etymological argument linking religion with iterability, focusing on the repetition implied in the ‘re-’ (Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 74).
7. Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 62.
8. Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 84.
9. Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 79-80.
10. Auto-immunity does appear in Derrida’s publications prior to 1996 (the original publication date of “Faith and Knowledge”), but in these instances it is mentioned more in passing, and not as a central term in Derrida’s analysis. In *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London & New York: Routledge, 1994) 14, Derrida writes that the “living ego is auto-immune, which is what they do not want to know. To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within (so many figures of death: differance of the technical apparatus, iterability, non-uniqueness, prosthesis, synthetic image, simulacrum, all of which begins with language, before language), it must therefore take the immune defenses apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once *for itself and against itself*.” In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida speaks of the “modality of the possible, the unquenchable *perhaps*, would, implacably, destroy everything, by means of a sort of self-immunity [*auto-immunité*] from which no region of being, *phúsis* or history would be exempt” and of the “imminence of a self-destruction by the infinite development of a madness of self-immunity [*auto-immunité*].” Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London & New York: Verso, 1997 [1994]) 75-76
11. Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 80.
12. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 74.
13. Derrida argues for an incalculability in equality itself by citing Aristotle’s *Politics* (Bk V, 1301 a19): “Democracy, for example, arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal” (cited in Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 74). I am quoting from the Jowett translation; Derrida cites Aubonnet’s French translation). On the basis of this citation, Derrida suggests that in our demand for equal liberty we make “equality an intrinsic part of liberty and thus it is no longer calculable... It is an equality incalculable and incommensurable in itself, it is the unconditional condition of liberty” (Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 75). That is, in its alignment with a liberty beyond calculation, equality (which begins in the order of the calculable and the measurable) shares in this incalculability. Equality itself is incommensurable with itself, being neither a simple calculability nor a simple incalculability. Derrida is thus arguing for an essential incalculability always already at work in equality itself.
14. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 46-47.
15. “La Raison du Plus Fort” is saturated with figures of the wheel that propel Derrida’s analysis. Here the wheel is used to point to the fact that there is a kind of freedom in play in the taking-in-turns, even while it comes at the cost of restricting personal freedom.
16. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 30.
17. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 49. Derrida also notes that today “the sole and very rare regimes that *do not present themselves* as democratic are theocratic Muslim regimes of government” [Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 52]. Coupled with his later comments regarding the relative lack of thinkers in the history of Western philosophy who have “sided without reserve with democracy” [Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 66], this remark has the effect of aligning a certain kind of Islam with a certain (dominant) tradition in Western philosophy.

18. Speaking of ‘chance’ and ‘threat’ is here more appropriate than using the terms ‘best’ and ‘worst’, even if Derrida himself at times appeals to a notion of the worst. For what I describe as democracy’s chance—its right to autocritique and perfectibility—has no guarantee of producing something good. Indeed, the threats to democracy discussed below often present themselves as improvements or perfections to the current state of democratic affairs. Thus, the chance and the threat in democracy cannot be so easily delineated and cannot be aligned with the good and the bad, reflected in the fact that Derrida labels both of them effects of auto-immunity.

19. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 126-127.

20. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 54.

21. “[T]he fascist and nazi totalitarianisms came to power, they took power in the course of electoral dynamics formally normal and formally democratic” (Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 57-58). It is also worth noting that only three months before this talk was delivered Le Pen qualified in the first round [*tour*] of the French Presidential elections.

22. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 59.

23. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 57.

24. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 65.

25. This receives a more extensive treatment in Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” 94-106. There Derrida inscribes the attacks against the World Trade Center within a greater logic of the Cold War.

26. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 64-65.

27. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 60.

28. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 61.

29. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 61.

30. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 59.

31. Derrida, “La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)” 71.

32. We find the same situation in Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides.” Here Derrida also refers to the definition in ‘Faith and Knowledge,’ and states that “As we know, an autoimmunitary process is that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (94). Yet, when it comes to using this concept to describe September 11 and its surrounding events, the emphasis is again on the way democracy attacks a part of itself, without any discussion of these parts constituting democracy’s defenses.

33. Derrida himself obviously see some promise in auto-immunity, and I would not be surprised if we continue to see it used in at least a few of his publications to come. But he is not alone in seeing auto-immunity as a term that has potential to be useful in critical analysis. Two articles that recently appeared in the French press also use the phrase. The first is by René Major. In response to an article praising a recent decision by the French Minister of Health regarding the legal status of psychoanalysis, Major asks “What would psychoanalysis suffer from? An aggression from the outside world? No. From an auto-immune illness. You know, these illnesses where an organism destroys its own defenses against all aggressions.” (“Pour une Psychanalyse hors d’Etat,” *Libération*, 15 March 2004, my translation). Major does not cite Derrida, but given their history of collaboration and Major’s later comparison of the date of the ministerial decision as being as memorable as September 11, the source is apparent. The second article is by Edwy Plenel, the editor of *Le Monde*, who in an article on the March 11 attacks in Madrid cites Derrida approvingly in his evocation of “these ‘auto-immune processes’ by which our societies could come to immunise themselves against their own immunities, in a kind of concession to fear in fighting terror” (“Au vif,” *Le Monde* 2, 21-22 March 2004, my translation). Both writers refer to the more specific definition of auto-immunity, suggesting that it is in this specificity that they locate the usefulness of the term.

34. One might argue that my worry that auto-immunity casts democracy as defense is legitimate, but misplaced in targeting Derrida, since he is in favour not of “democracy” but of “democracy to come.” It is true that throughout this paper I have barely spoken of the “to come,” which is present across the whole of “La Raison du Plus Fort,” since I have been more interested in Derrida’s diagnoses of

the risks faced by democracies today. However, what I have argued concerning auto-immunity's relationship to democracy holds equally for democracy to come. Not only because, as we see in a passage cited above (Derrida, "La Raison du Plus Fort (Y a-t-il des États Voyous?)" 126-127), Derrida states that auto-immunity is at work in democracy to come. But more importantly because Derrida's notion of democracy to come does not set itself up as an alternative to democracy. These are not rival regimes from which we might choose. Democracy, in its essential impropriety, is already "to come." This is why it is in democracy—in its conceptual configurations and in its historical instantiations, as confused as these are—that Derrida searches for the meaning of democracy to come. In this way the relationship between democracy to come and democracy is much like that between the messianic and individual messianisms.

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