Free Contribution

To the Human and Beyond

Interview with Michael Naas

Michael Naas

Department of Philosophy at DePaul University
2352 N. Clifton, Suite 150, Chicago, IL 60614, U.S.A.
MNAAS@depaul.edu

Magdalena Sedmak

Department of Philosophy, University of Vienna
Universitätsstr. 7, 1010 Vienna, Austria
magdalena.sedmak@univie.ac.at

Abstract

In the course of the research project “Revenge of the Sacred: Phenomenology and the Ends of Christianity”, a group of scholars based at the University of Vienna attempts to understand a modern society that is seemingly no longer Christian, yet also not yet non-Christian. How does the citizen negotiate the ambiguities between the religious and the political in this ambivalent space that seems to be becoming increasingly “post-secular” in a way that is not necessarily “anti-secular?” We explore the core of these and other questions with contemporary scholars in a series of interviews entitled “What moves you? Human Rights, Hearts, Beliefs – and Beyond.” This interview was conducted with the Derrida specialist, professor, and translator Michael Naas (De Paul University, IL, U.S.). It covers the topics of globalization, migration, hospitality, all in the context of human rights, secularism, and religion today.

Keywords

Jacques Derrida – migration – hospitality – secularism – human rights – faith

Magdalena Sedmak¹: In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt says: “We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation. The trouble is that this calamity arose not from any lack of civilization, backwardness, or mere tyranny, but on the contrary, that it could not be repaired, because there was no longer any ‘uncivilized’ spot on earth, because whether we like it or not *we have really started to live in One World*. Only with a completely organized humanity could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity all together.”² – the expulsion from humanity; what can you make of that?

Michael Naas: I think I understand where Arendt is coming from – the experience of mass migration after the Second World War, the dangers of totalitarian regimes, but then also the affirmation of human rights in the wake of these events. This is one place where Arendt’s work overlaps with Derrida’s: the interest in the notion of the human or of humanity and the notion of human rights in relation to nation states, state sovereignty and citizenry, but also, and especially, beyond the nation state. Hence Derrida in his seminars on politics and hospitality in the mid-1990s talked about Kant in relationship to human rights and, though I don’t recall him using this expression, this right to have rights, about Kant’s emphasis in his work on cosmopolitanism and nation states and the right, affirmed by Kant, to visit, to be offered temporary asylum or hospitality, but not necessarily the right to stay and become a citizen. And this then leads to Arendt’s questions and concerns, which are also Derrida’s, worries about peoples who are stateless and who have lost their right to seek refuge or asylum in any particular state. For Arendt, one cannot take away the right to have rights but one can and does take away citizenship, and that is what has led to our contemporary immigration crises, masses of people

1 This interview was conducted with the generous support of the FWF (Austrian Science Fund) for the project “Revenge of the Sacred: Phenomenology and the Ends of Christianity in Europe” (P: 31919).

2 Arendt 2004, 290.

without citizenship and, without citizenship, without an ability to claim those supposedly inalienable human rights. Derrida is thinking along with Arendt in that direction. He would thus affirm Arendt on this score. But he would go on to pose critical questions about the very notion of rights and human rights. He would accept their strategic and political value but he would also draw attention to their limitations, to the way in which they are so commonly tied, enforced, by the nation state and by conventions among nations. He would also be suspicious about the way in which these “human” rights are limited, precisely, to the human. Derrida was not someone who necessarily wanted to extend these rights, these so-called “human” rights, to other beings, other living beings, but he did want to ask by what right we grant such rights to the human alone.

Sedmak: By what right then, would you say, do we grant “human” rights? Since they are founded on a Christian ideal, namely that, within each human being, there lies an innate sacredness, it is that which justifies our entitlement to such rights aiming to protect that sacredness.

Naas: Well, again, Derrida will come to affirm and to question that which Kant calls dignity, the dignity of the human, the “*Würdigkeit*” of the human. On the one hand, Derrida would criticize this notion for its limitation to the human and, no doubt, for its inherently Christian character. He would see in it a kind of metaphysical humanism that needs to be put in question. But that then leads to the question of what Derrida would put in its place. To hazard an answer, I think it would have something to do with an inherent and inalienable relationship to the future. Derrida would thus argue that this “intrinsic value” is situated beyond that inherent dignity of the human, in something like an opening to the world, an opening to the future of both oneself and others, an opening that could also function as a point of critique of anything “intrinsic” or “inherent” within the human. So I think this is what replaces – or supplements – that notion of *Würdigkeit*: openness, an openness to the future and to the other. This means being open to what comes, to what arrives, to what cannot be predicted in advance. I don’t think there is any limit, then, to this openness, or at least not one that can be determined in advance. So I don’t think you have to decide right away or in advance who has dignity and who does not, or rather who or what opens up experience to this future and who or what does not.

Sedmak: Going back to Derrida’s seminars on politics and hospitality that you mentioned, how is this openness to be understood when thinking about

migration politics? Hospitality has both a positive and a negative phenomenon, does it not? – it must always be accompanied, and defined through hostility.

Naas: Derrida does indeed seem to suggest that the possibility of hospitality must always be accompanied by hostility, or by the intrinsic possibility of hostility. I don't think that one comes before the other, or that you have to be or to have one before the other. It is not as if you have to be hostile to be hospitable or hospitable in order then to be hostile. It's just that the possibility of the one comes with the other ... Because the possibility of welcoming someone, of welcoming someone who may teach me who I am, who may bring me something wonderful that I could have never expected, is inseparable from the possibility of welcoming the worst, someone or something that, as it were, will abuse my hospitality and maybe compromise even my ability to be hospitable in the future ...

Sedmak: So, would you say that the world is in need of, if I may, *Derridean* politics, this openness with caution?

Naas: Well, yes, perhaps. But this makes it sound like Derrida is promoting a sort of openness with caution, a kind of negotiation between two competing principles, in a way that is reminiscent of what came to be known in the United States under the banner "trust, but verify". There is an element in Derrida that maybe sounds like that. But the more Derridean thought is, I think, more aporetic. It involves an injunction to think together two things that are incompatible but nevertheless must be considered together, namely, an unconditional hospitality, on the one side or the one hand, and then the necessity of judging, or drawing limits, the necessity of welcoming particular others into one's home or one's nation state, in short, a conditional hospitality, on the other. Both of these are necessary, it seems, because an unconditional hospitality without conditions would be ineffective, would end up welcoming no one at all, while a conditional hospitality without unconditional hospitality would risk foreclosing the very motivation or drive or desire of hospitality itself.

Sedmak: Would you, leaning on Derrida, apply this language to unconditional claims as well?

Naas: Two possibilities here: first, you could say that unconditional hospitality is the goal, the ideal, and that that ideal is always compromised by conditional hospitality, by a hospitality that betrays or compromises the ideal. But one could also say that, even in conditional hospitality, even when you set some

conditions or limits, the impulse, drive, or desire is nevertheless motivated by unconditional hospitality. In other words: you would never open your home, even conditionally, to someone unless there was a drive to accept the other as other, to accept that future openness that I spoke of earlier. In this latter case, then, it is the notion of an unconditional hospitality that gives meaning to the very word and concept hospitality.

Sedmak: It seems that revised concepts of hospitality are crucial in the world today, for the politics of migration and asylum – consider the U.S. Muslim ban from 2017.

Naas: Yes, right. Your reference to the contemporary situation in the US makes me want to take back some of what I just said about conditional and unconditional hospitality! Even before Donald Trump took over, though especially since then, it is hard to see anything like that principle of “unconditional hospitality” motivating the conditional hospitality known as US immigration policy. Even before Trump, though especially now, we tend to think not about how we have a responsibility to respond to the call of the other, to that openness to the future, to our future, that I mentioned, not about how that responsibility is manifest in those in need or whose lives are threatened, but more about how those we welcome will contribute – indeed *must* contribute as a condition for their acceptance – to the US by their human and monetary capital. In other words, it is difficult to see the desire and drive of unconditional hospitality motivating *that* kind of immigration policy. As for the so-called Muslim ban, it is hard to see in that anything but a very grotesque exploitation of fears and prejudices, of xenophobia mobilized for the ends of domestic politics.

Sedmak: Where in Derrida does the heart, the emotional, meet the political in that way?

Naas: It is interesting that you pose the question in this way. In his seminars on the death penalty, Derrida talks about this kind of argument, an argument of the heart, so to speak, that usually does not find a place in philosophy. Derrida in effect devoted two years to this question. Before his final seminar, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, he gave a two-year seminar on *The Death Penalty*. Now, when most people talk about the death penalty, they usually ask whether it functions as a deterrent or not, whether it costs more to the state, and so on. There is none of that – or very little – in Derrida. He instead reads and analyzes with his students, especially during the first year, literary texts on the death penalty: Victor Hugo, Albert Camus, Shelly, Blanchot, Baudelaire, and so on. And

then, during the second year, he reads many more philosophical texts, and especially Kant's justification of the death penalty in *Metaphysics of Morals*. Derrida thus seems to combine two different analyses and two different arguments through two different kinds of texts. One, you could say, is a kind of philosophical argument about the death penalty and the other is an argument, in part, of the heart. And I am not sure exactly how these two go together, and they perhaps need to be considered as conflicting injunctions in the way we just talked about with regard to hospitality, but it is clear that Derrida thought both arguments were needed. You know – and Derrida mentions this – there is a strange expression in French that one sometimes uses to speak of a loved one, someone dear to you; one calls the other *mon coeur*, “my heart,” an expression in everyday French that somehow suggests that *my* heart is outside of me, that *my* heart beats in the other outside of me, in the one who is dear to me, the one I call *mon coeur*, my heart. I am not sure what more I can make of it, but it is interesting that reflections about this phrase and about the heart more generally crop up so frequently in this seminar on the death penalty.

Sedmak: It is interesting this comes up in the death penalty seminars, although not that surprising since it is so emotionally charged – and affects the one who is – potentially – sentenced to death as well as their “loved ones”. Would you consider a death sentence an event in the Derridean sense? – When Jaques Derrida was interviewed in 2001 by Giovanna Borradori, he spoke about an event, as something that, I quote: “*something* comes or happens for the first and last time, *something* that we do not yet really know how to identify, determine, recognize, or analyze but that should remain from here on in unforgettable: an ineffaceable event in the shared archive of a universal calendar, that is, a *supposedly* universal calendar, for these are – and I want to insist on this at the outset – only suppositions and presuppositions. Unrefined and dogmatic, or else carefully considered, organized, calculated, strategic – or all of these at once.”³ Can such an event be anticipated, be it a singular death sentence or, as it was spoken of in the context of the interview, 9–11?

Naas: Well, can anyone really anticipate such an event? On the one hand, the event is always, for Derrida, absolutely unique; it must remain, in order to be an event, absolutely unanticipatable, beyond every horizon of interpretation or expectation. In that regard, the “event” of September 11 would be exemplary. Derrida is talking in that interview about an event that happened on a unique day, September eleventh 2001. It was an event that happened once, on a unique

3 Borradori/Derrida: *9/11 and Global Terrorism*.

day, an event that, as we say, no one saw coming and that we will never see again. And yet, as Derrida underscores in his conversation with Borradori, the events of that day, however unexpected, were nonetheless foreshadowed by other so-called terrorist attacks before then, even by a previous attack on the World Trade Center. Moreover, even though September 11th, 2001 was a unique event and a unique date in history, there is a September 11th every year, in other words, a date that marks and makes us recall and thus repeat in memory, to some extent, what happened on that day. So, on the one hand, September eleventh marks an absolutely unique day, and, on the other, in order to be remembered, in order for that event to be recognizable as such, it needs to be repeated and iterated. That repetition at once consolidates the event as that which it was, a significant date in history with a past and a future, at the same time as it begins to erode the event's singularity, its inability to be assimilated to history.

Sedmak: Do you see elements of Nietzsche's eternal return here? – The event is retrospectively recognizable, not anticipated then.

Naas: Yes, I think that is right. The event is recognized retrospectively, but it might also be said that the event is neutralized when it is recognized in this way. That is the case with death, which is, for Derrida, an event that challenges all our expectations and our ability to recognize. Let me tell you a story about the book *The Work of Mourning*, a book I edited and translated with my wife, Pascale-Anne Brault, right around the time of September 11th. The idea of the book was to gather together and translate a series of essays written by Derrida after the deaths of friends and colleagues such as Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Paul de Man, and so on. There are some fifteen or so essays in all. Now the logic of those texts, the logic of mourning that Derrida tries to develop in them, consists in thinking that death is absolutely unique, incomparable and unassimilable, undialectizable, as Derrida says, but that death or deaths are also, in our experience, repeated or repeatable. Over the course of our lives we see many people die, and while each death is unique, each new death also seems to remind us of all the others. It is from here that Derrida begins to understand friendship itself in terms of this relationship between an unanticipatable death of the friend and a certain knowledge that the friend will die, or that you will die before the friend. Derrida's very beautiful way of thinking friendship here is to say that what gives friendship its motivation is that we know, from the beginning, and this is what makes us friends, that, between the two of us, one of us is going to die before the other. One of the two of us is going to see the other die and so one will be left in the world to mourn and bury and remember the other.

So, in that sense, the event, specifically the event of death, is foreseeable. And yet, as anyone who has experienced the death of a friend or a loved one knows, when the event actually happens, it happens in a way that is unforeseeable, unexpected, unassimilable within our world, impossible to reckon through some knowledge of the world. According to Derrida, that is because the death of the other closes down a world, that opening of the world or that opening to the future that we talked about – all that gets foreclosed or eclipsed by the death of the friend. As Derrida puts it, each time uniquely it's the end of the world. In other words, the death of the other, of the friend, is not just a death *within* the world, one death among others, but a death *of* the world in the form of the opening of the world that the other was. So, you see, death as an event is, in this sense, at once repeatable and completely unrepeatable, understandable as that which has happened and will happen again and yet, at the same time, absolutely unique.

Sedmak: Could you think of war or conflict in that way? In such an encounter, it is presumed that one will fall before the other. With that in mind, is it possible to think of war and friendship in a similar way? ... does the nation mourn?

Naas: Well, my natural tendency is to think that the nation state *as* nation state, the nation state *qua* nation state, always tries to conceal mourning, or else to mobilize it for political ends. I left a strand in our previous exchange dangling so let me now go back to that to answer your question. You spoke of Derrida's interview about 9–11. Well, that interview took place just weeks after 9–11, in late October, right at the moment, coincidentally, that the volume *The Work of Mourning* was scheduled to come out in English. It was impossible not to be struck at the time by the coincidence between those two events and equally impossible not to be interested in the different ways or strategies or interpretations of mourning on display in that book and then in the US and the world at large after 9–11. One way, then, of thinking the death of the friend, as we just said, is in terms not just of the loss of someone dear to me in the world but the loss of the world itself, the end of the world itself, in its totality. One can imagine an event such as 9–11 opening up a similar abyss, exposing us to a similar loss, and for those of us who lived through 9–11 it is hard not to think that there was some of that in our experience. But it is difficult to imagine the nation state treating death in that way or trying to respond in a way that would do justice to that loss. For the nation state tries always, it seems, to recuperate the death of the other for political ends. From Pericles's famous funeral oration to the United States' reaction to 9–11, a reaction that began with tears and individual expressions of emotion and that soon led to public memorials and,

eventually, to the revving up of the war machine and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the nation state seems to mobilize death to achieve political objectives, to interpret death in terms of a sacrifice for the state that calls us, the living, to future action.

Sedmak: Perhaps we can try to tie the political back in with the sacred. It seems that the political is in the way of the heart, as we now called it. But, religion and politics are closely interrelated. Yet, religion attempts this split between the heart and its institutional, political role. What does that mean in a society, that is neither religious, yet not yet un-religious; religion being in-between? Can you think these three together still, or does religion, especially Christianity as a somewhat foundational structure, cease to exist as such?

Naas: Derrida seems to suggest that religion has never gone away and therefore does not need to come back or to return. Though we may seem to live in secular or post-secular age, religiosity is still present, it seems, a kind of Christianity behind or within that secularism, a Globalatinization, as Derrida called it, within what is called Globalization. Hence Derrida invites us to think a kind of religiosity within what appears to be the most secular society, a kind of faith, one that is Christian, though also one that exceeds Christianity insofar as it is related to that opening to the future we have been speaking about, an originary faith even within what appears to be the most hyper-technological, secular society. Derrida saw that kind of religiosity – both the Christian kind and the more originary kind – everywhere in today's world.

As for the heart ... (chuckles), I'm not sure. The question of the heart goes way back in Derrida, well before the seminar on *The Death Penalty* we spoke of earlier. We could mention here Pascal's famous line, which Derrida cites in places, about the heart having reasons that reason cannot understand. But the heart, the *coeur*, is a theme or an image or an interest that, as it were, beats constantly throughout Derrida's work. It scans Derrida's entire oeuvre, like a heartbeat, though it is not always the direct or explicit object of his analyses. The heart returns in everything from Derrida's reading of Plato's critique of writing and the question of what it means to learn *by heart* to Derrida's later thinking, in *The Death Penalty Seminar*, of the relationship between the heart, blood, and life, to Derrida's interest, in his seminars of the late 1990s on forgiveness, in the religious notion of pity or *misericordia*, a word that itself has the Latin word for heart, *cor*, at its heart. But, as usual, Derrida often thinks the heart, as we saw earlier, not in terms of what is most my one, in terms of what gives me my life, etc. but in terms of a kind of exteriority, in terms – you will recall that

expression *mon coeur* – of a bit of other beating in me, or my heart beating in another, the heart, *mon coeur*, as that which is elsewhere.

Biography

Michael Naas is professor of philosophy at DePaul University in Chicago. He teaches courses in Philosophy and Comparative Literature and conducts research in the areas of ancient Greek philosophy and contemporary French philosophy. His approach to the classics is informed by thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Lyotard, and Levinas. His recent published work includes co-translations of Jacques Derrida's *The Other Heading* (Indiana, 1992), *Learning to Live Finally* (Melville, 2007), and *Life Death* (Chicago, forthcoming 2020). He is co-editor of Jacques Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago, 2000) and *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Galilee, 2004), *Derrida in Montreal: A Play in Three Acts* (Montreal, 2019).

Magdalena Sedmak, educated in the United States (International Baccalaureate), Norway (University of Bergen) and Austria (University of Vienna) is a student and research assistant at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vienna. The project she is currently working on is the FWF project "Revenge of the sacred: Phenomenology and the ends of Christianity". This interview was conducted with the generous support of the FWF, the Austrian Science Fund (P 31919)

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books, 2004.
- Borradori, Giovanna/Derrida, Jacques: *9/11 and Global Terrorism. A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida*. Available online: <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/derrida/derrida911.html> [accessed last on 18.11.2019].