Although it is plausible to read an implicit negotiation of political themes across Derrida’s oeuvre, as he and many commentators have claimed, this is harder to maintain for the specific case of democracy. For democracy was absent in name from Derrida’s writings for a long time. It only started appearing regularly in his work in the early 1990s, and the majority of these appearances involve a fleeting reference to the term “democracy” in a variety of discussions, some closely related to it, others more distant. Indeed, it is only in two texts, Politics of Friendship and “The Reason of the Strongest (Are There Rogue States?),” that democracy is subject to a sustained analysis. In the former, which arose out of his 1988–89 seminar and was published 1994, Derrida interrogates the relationships among fraternity, friendship, and political belonging in a wide range of thinkers, including Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Montaigne, Kant, Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Blanchot. It is a long and complex work, with the focus more on “the political” than specifically on “democracy.” “The Reason of the Strongest,” first delivered at Cerisy in 2002 and subsequently published in Rogues, is a more comprehensive and detailed reflection on democracy, following a pattern very much like that of Aporias (a text, as I noted in Chapter 1, that was also presented at a Cerisy conference devoted to Derrida’s work), where Derrida returns to a term present but more or less unexamined in his previous writings. In this reinterpretation of “democracy to come,” Derrida draws out its implicit meanings, analyzes its operation, and redeploy it anew.

It is thus the case that although Derrida does explicitly focus on democracy in some of his writings, there remain many aspects of his analysis that call for further articulation. In this chapter I pursue one theme raised but undeveloped by Derrida:
the role played by inheritance. I argue that for Derrida not only is democracy inherited, a claim he explicitly makes, but also that implicit in his position is the claim that inheritance itself can be a democratic action.

I will proceed by first expanding on one of Derrida’s earliest descriptions of democracy, where he links it to the idea of a promise, before turning to the more complete account found in “The Reason of the Strongest” (I examine Politics of Friendship at length in Chapter 5, reading it as a particular example of democratic inheritance). But before continuing, I should make one point regarding terminology. When “democracy” appears in Derrida’s writings, it rarely does so alone. More often than not, what is named is not just of “democracy,” but “democracy to come.” In Chapter 2 I touched on some of the connotations of the qualifier “to come” in Derrida’s work, and another aim of this chapter is to explore these more fully. A complete appreciation of this term’s implications will thus have to wait. But I can say in advance that “democracy” and “democracy to come” are not two competing concepts or two opposed political structures in Derrida’s writings. “Democracy to come” is not a blueprint of what democracy ought to be, an updated or improved version of what is usually called “democracy.” Rather, Derrida argues that because of its particular characteristics democracy has always been “to come.” He writes “democracy to come” when he wants to emphasize this fact. But when he speaks only of “democracy,” one should also hear the trace of the “to come” resonating with it. Following Derrida in this respect, throughout this chapter I will thus speak both of democracy and democracy to come, interchanging the terms freely.

The Inheritance of a Promise

One of the earliest appearances of democracy to come in Derrida’s work is in 1991’s The Other Heading. This text is devoted to the question of how one might inherit the legacy of Europe in the light of the radical changes that took place with the fall of the Soviet Union. I argued in the previous chapter that for Derrida legacies are always divided and contradictory, and the legacy of Europe is no exception. At the heart of its contradiction is a law that Derrida takes to be axiomatic: “What is proper to a culture is to not be identical to itself.” According to this axiom, a culture is always different from itself and thus different from the very idea of “being with itself”—a culture is never one, resisting unification, involving difference and an unassumable remainder. In the particular culture of Europe, Derrida locates this difference in an aporia of universalization. He argues that modern philosophical discourse (in particular the work of Husserl, Heidegger, and Valéry) holds that Europe carries the universal spirit of humanity, while this spirit is at the same time inscribed in a particular culture, heritage, and idiom. Europe is thus presented as both universal and particular. It has its own identity, but this identity lies in its universalizing tendency, in which it surpasses its own identity. This contradiction is equally in play within Europe in a different sense, as it moves toward an increasing unification that would both represent a single spirit while respecting national differences.
As always for Derrida, the question is how one is to respond to this contradiction. This is a question of inheritance, posed in a vocabulary that should be now quite familiar.

We must ourselves be responsible for this discourse of the modern tradition. We bear the responsibility for this heritage, right along with the capitalizing memory that we have of it. We did not choose this responsibility; it imposes itself upon us, and in an even more imperative way, in that it is, as other, and from the other, the language of our language. How then does one assume this responsibility, this capital duty [devoir]? How does one respond? And above all, how does one assume a responsibility that announces itself as contradictory because it inscribes us from the very beginning of the game into a kind of necessarily double obligation, a double bind? The injunction in effect divides us; it puts us always at fault or in default since it doubles the il faut, the it is necessary: it is necessary to make ourselves the guardians of an idea of Europe, of a difference of Europe, but of a Europe that consists precisely in not closing itself off in its own identity and in advancing itself in an exemplary way toward what it is not, toward the other heading or the heading of the other, indeed—and this is perhaps something else altogether—toward the other of the heading, which would be the beyond of this modern tradition, another border structure, another shore.3

The legacy of Europe is here presented as a contradictory injunction that imposes itself necessarily, without consent. And its division is also necessary, harboring within it an alterity that offers the chance of something altogether other, beyond the economy of the modern tradition that is received. This legacy is thus exemplary of the structure of Derridean inheritance I developed in Chapter 2.

For my present purpose, what is most interesting in The Other Heading is the position occupied by democracy. The essay ends with a list of several duties that arise from this tension between the universal and the particular in the identity and heritage of Europe. I have in fact already mentioned these duties—they were the subject of Derrida's self-reflection in Aporias that I discussed at the beginning of Chapter 1. One of them runs as follows:

The same duty dictates assuming the European, and uniquely European, heritage of an idea of democracy, while also recognizing that this idea, like that of international law, is never simply given, that its status is not even that of a regulative idea in the Kantian sense, but rather something that remains to be thought and to come [à venir]: not something that is certain to happen tomorrow, not the democracy (national or international, state or trans-state) of the future, but a democracy that must have the structure of a promise—and thus the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now.4

Here Derrida repeats another aspect of legacies that I have analyzed, namely their adherence to the logic of spacing. The heritage of democracy involves all three tenses of time, and a dimension of space, in the specific configuration that presents the past as carrying the future in the here and now. However, what is new here is a further claim
linking democracy to the structure of a promise. This is why it can be said to be “to come.” Democracy is thus presented here not as a political system with clearly defined rules or criteria (and Derrida distances democracy from this more and more as time goes on), nor is it necessarily an idea, Kantian or otherwise. It is a promise. A similar claim is made in the dialogue “Sauf le nom,” dating from the same period, where, at the end of a long discussion of negative theology, Derrida again turns to questions of European inheritance and raises “the example of democracy, of the idea of democracy, of democracy to come (neither the Idea in the Kantian sense, nor the current, limited, and determined concept of democracy, but democracy as the inheritance of a promise).”

Thus in two of its earliest appearances in Derrida’s texts, “democracy to come” is affirmed as inherited and is identified with the structure of a promise. At this point inheritance needs no further explanation, but I have not yet discussed the nature of a promise. Derrida analyzes this notion extensively in his writings, and one of its later appearances is in “Avances,” the preface to Serge Margel’s _Le tombeau du dieu artisan_. Margel’s book focuses on Plato’s _Timaeus_, a text Derrida also discussed on a number of occasions, most notably for its invocation of khōra. Khōra will reappear later in my analysis of democracy, but for now I want to examine what Derrida says in this text about the promise. Extending Margel’s work, Derrida writes that “there is here an intrinsic aporia of the concept of the promise” (AV, 26). Once again, an aporia is named. However, it is never enough to simply accept Derrida’s ascription of an aporia—one must ask each time precisely how the particular notion in question indeed is aporetic. In this case Derrida argues that the aporia is constituted by a necessary contradiction between the need for a promise to be both infinite and finite, which is quickly assimilated to a distinction between the calculable and the incalculable. The promise

must always be, at once, at the same time, _infinite and finite_ in its principle: It is _infinite_ because it must be able to be carried beyond any possible program, and because to promise only the calculable and the certain is no longer to promise; it is _finite_ because to promise the infinite to the infinite is no longer to promise anything presentable, and hence no longer to promise. To be a promise, a promise _must be able to be untenable_ [intenable] and so be able _not to be_ a promise (for an untenable promise is not a promise). Conclusion: one will never _state_ , no more than for the gift, _that there is or there has been_ a promise. (AV, 26)

If a promise promises only the calculable, Derrida claims, then it is no longer a promise. Hence the need to promise what is beyond the calculable. But at the same time, Derrida also maintains that if a promise promises beyond the calculable, it promises the unpresentable, which entails also that it no longer be a promise. Thus a promise is required to be both calculable and incalculable. It is aporetic.

There are a number of statements here that need justification. To consider the second claim first, one may well question why the unpresentable is unacceptable as the
content of a promise. Here Derrida relies on what he presents as a classical definition of the promise, in which the intentionality and sovereignty of the speaker must be assumed in order for the promise to be counted as such. “No doubt, in order to promise, it is necessary to know seriously, before all, what is promised. By whom and to whom—and what we mean and know when we say we promise to each other [nous nous promettons]. Knowledge and seriousness, the self-presence of intentional consciousness as such belong without doubt to the essence of promising” (AV, 41). For a promise to be a promise, according to this view, one must know what is promised, by whom and to whom. However, if one promises the unpresentable, then this knowledge is what is lacking. Thus one of the traditionally essential attributes of the promise is missing if one promises something beyond the calculable.

This accounts for one arm of the aporia—to contain an element of the incalculable is enough to threaten the integrity of the promise. But what of the other arm? Why is a calculable promise no longer a promise? Derrida gives an answer to this question when he writes:

But if the promised of the promise (including the meaning, the subject and the object of the act of promising that are part of the promised content) is absolutely known, determined, pre-sensed or presentable, if it even already has an adequate name, there is no more promise, there is only calculation, program, anticipation, providence, previson, prognostic: everything will have already happened, everything is beforehand [tout est auparavant], repeated in advance. As that which it is, indeed (perhaps a certain Aristotle would have said) as that which it will have been or will have been destined to be: To ti ēn einai. We conjugate here only in the future anterior. Ruining the placement [la mise], this antecedence of the before [avant] puts the pro-position of the promise in danger—that it nonetheless opens and puts to work. (AV, 41)

One must proceed slowly here because Derrida is advancing a complicated claim. He states that if one promises only the calculable, the absolutely known or determined, then when what is promised arrives, it arrives as having already arrived. Derrida is right to highlight the future anterior, for its use here is essential. The claim is not that to promise what is already known is to make it happen in the instant that it is promised—by promising what is known one does not bring it about in the very same moment. Rather, Derrida’s claim is that in promising the certain, one makes it happen, when it happens, as having already happened. It is thus to have a specific effect on the nature of the promise’s arrival, ensuring that it arrives as the return of what has already taken place.

This, however, raises a further question, namely of what justifies the move from this claim to the conclusion that promising the calculable is not to promise at all. To answer this, another assumption is needed, which is that a promise must promise the new. This assumption is revealed as Derrida continues, writing that the dimension of incalculability he acknowledges in the promise “is not an empirical blindness or
imprudence. Heterogeneous to calculation, it *lets come* or it *makes come* on the condition, and this is the condition of the event, of no longer seeing come, on the condition of overflowing sight or knowledge, of gaining speed over them even when they remain needed” (AV, 41–42). For Derrida, a promise must be an event, and by this he means that it must contain an element of surprise, something unforeseen, not programmed, and beyond control. Given this requirement, what is promised cannot arrive as the return of what has already happened, and so it cannot involve the calculable alone.

The final question to ask thus concerns this requirement of the new. Why must a promise be an event? Why can one not promise only what is certain to happen, or what happens as having already happened? While Derrida does not here make this connection, this assumption can be explained by recalling his analysis of iterability, which I discussed in Chapter 1. As a mark, a promise is iterable, which means that its perfect repetition is strictly impossible. There is always the possibility that it will be repeated differently, and so one can never be certain that what is promised to happen will actually come to pass. Promising thus retains an element of the new, a dimension of incalculability, and so is aporetic in its structure.

Derrida is thus justified in labeling the promise as aporetic, divided between the dual demands of calculability and incalculability, and so remains beyond all mastery and knowledge. One would thereby expect democracy to come to have this characteristic, given the description of it as “the inheritance of a promise.” In addition, Derrida proposes in “Avances” two consequences of his analysis that will also be relevant to democracy. First, he argues that the essential dimension of nonknowledge in the promise results in an instability around the status of names. This is touched on in one of the previous citations, when Derrida refuses the promise “an adequate name,” and is developed later in the text when he writes, “For all to depend on it and be inscribed there *without knowing it*, it is necessary that the names are lacking to ‘us.’ The names are necessary, it is necessary that the names be in default, but this default ought not be the negativity of a lack. . . . We do not know if these names that we lack are absent because buried far below a given memory or more distant than any given future” (AV, 42). Taken out of context, these words are enigmatic. They allude, in part, to the difficulty in naming what is given the name “khōra,” which I will return to later in this chapter. But for now note the instability here described, for Derrida claims both that names are necessary and that it is necessary that these names are in default. Further, the logic of spacing is evoked in his remark that one does not know whether these names lie buried below the past or remain beyond any future.

The second consequence relevant to democracy is Derrida’s claim that the promise cannot remain immune to all threat. “For a promise to *remain* a promise, must it not then *risk*, this is its obsessive fear *[c’est sa hantise]*, must it not risk continuously, incessantly, in an endless imminence, to pervert itself into a threat? Not only that it threatens to remain untenable but threatens to become threatening?” (AV, 42–43). The threat here is not just that the promise will undermine itself, or fail to come to pass,
but that what is promised will be threatening. For Derrida, promises promise both the
good and the bad, the safe and the dangerous, and the possibility of danger can never
be erased.

This detour through Derrida’s analysis of the promise thus suggests several of
the characteristics that democracy—“the inheritance of a promise”—should pos-
sess. Democracy should be aporetic with respect to calculability and incalculability,
its affirmation will involve an essential dimension of nonknowledge, there will be an
instability around the status of its name, and it promises both safety and danger. As
I will now show, these features, and more, are indeed found in Derrida’s more direct
engagements with democracy.

Democracy in “The Reason of the Strongest”

One feature of Derrida’s analysis of the promise is its generality. Derrida does not
write about this or that promise, outlining any one promise’s particular content, but
discusses “the promise” in the abstract. Because of this, there is a danger that when
Derrida identifies democracy with a promise, the specificity of the former is lost in
the generality of the latter. This danger is only amplified by Derrida’s insistence on
the nonknowledge that a promise entails. If all promises involve nonknowledge and a
degree of indeterminacy, if they are all aporetic on the question of calculability, and if
they are all unstable with respect to their name, then it is unclear what distinguishes
the promise that is democracy. One thus must say more in order to determine what is
special about this particular promise such that it merits the name democracy, despite
its instability, and not another.

To do so I turn to Derrida’s “The Reason of the Strongest.” As I stated above, this
text contains Derrida’s most detailed and sustained discussion of democracy. This
is not surprising given its initial context—the Cerisy conference at which it was first
delivered in July 2002 was devoted to the theme of “democracy to come” in Derrida’s
work. In addition, the wider context of world politics at that time also encouraged an
exploration of this theme. The events of September 11, 2001, had placed the issue of
security in democracy center stage, and the commencement of the war in Afghan-
istan together with the beginnings of the Bush Administration’s rumblings against
Iraq made real the idea of invasion and occupation in the name of democracy. Closer
to Derrida’s home, in April 2002 Le Pen passed to the second round of the French
presidential elections, giving rise to the possibility of a government that is openly racist
and xenophobic coming to power in France with democratic legitimacy. Questions of
democracy’s future were thus being raised on a grand scale.9

Derrida approaches his topic by privileging the theme of freedom. This theme is
somewhat of a novelty in his writings, since it is not a term to which he had elsewhere
devoted much attention, but its presence here follows from its importance in any dis-
cussion of democracy. As Derrida states, “It is on the basis of freedom that we will have
conceived of the concept of democracy. This will be true throughout the entire history
of this concept, from Plato’s Greece onwards” (R, 22/V, 45). Democracy presupposes that the people are free to govern themselves. But this freedom is never unbounded. For one thing, as Derrida notes, there is a fine line between liberty and license (eleutheria and exousia in Plato’s Greece). Most democrats are in favor of liberty over license, and so restrictions on liberty are needed in democracy to prevent it passing over into its less desirable double. Further, even while freedom remains an irreducible element of democracy—a system of governing that has no place for freedom would hardly be called democratic—it is not its only trait. Most notably, democracy also essentially requires reference to equality. As there is always a plurality in democracy, one is never alone in self-government, and so the freedom that democracy demands must be an equal one. This is not to say that all those ruled in a democracy must have an equal share of freedom. Democracies have always excluded some from citizenship at the same time as it governs their lives, a feature that Derrida will examine at length. But among those who do qualify as citizens, the expectation is that they will share equally in the freedom that democracy promises.

Given this dual commitment, democrats are thus faced with the task of balancing freedom against equality. How might equal freedom be achieved such that all citizens remain equally free to govern themselves? Derrida highlights an answer discussed by Aristotle which proposes that each citizen governs in turn. Under this system of taking turns (tour à tour) citizens are sometimes rulers and sometimes ruled. It is a compromise solution, since no citizen is free to govern himself all of the time. Freedom is thus curtailed in the name of democratic equality. Yet it is one way of attempting to share freedom equally—everyone has some time governing and some time being governed, in equal measure. Of course, today a strict application of taking turns is not taken seriously as a viable option for democracy, since there is no question of letting everyone govern in his or her turn, regardless of personal qualities. Yet the general idea of taking turns is still the cornerstone of modern democracy with its system of elections. In theory, a modern democracy gives all citizens an equal share not in governing, but in electing their government at regular intervals.

Ultimately Derrida is not concerned with the details of the notion of taking turns. Rather, what interests him most is the significance of this particular response to the challenge of reconciling equality and freedom. The circular motion of the alternation of government (itself a response to the circular motion of the autodetermination demanded by the democratic ideal), together with the inability to cleanly distinguish liberty from license, are emblematic of what Derrida sees as democracy’s essential indeterminacy. “This freedom . . . presupposes, more radically still, more originally, a freedom of play, an opening of indetermination and indecidability in the very concept of democracy, in the interpretation of the democratic” (R, 25/V, 47). Democracy operates through the possibility of continual change, and so there is no single form that stands for it. All types of government are possible. This was, on Derrida’s reading, Plato’s main complaint against democracy as a system of government.
Inheriting Democracy to Come

Insofar as each person in this democracy can lead the life (bion) he chooses, we find in this regime, this politeia—which, as we will see, is not quite a regime, neither a constitution nor an authentic politeia—all sorts of people, a greater variety than anywhere else. Whence the multicolored beauty of democracy. . . . Because of the freedom and the multicoloredness of a democracy peopled by such a diversity of men, one would seek in vain a single constitution or politeia within it. Given over to freedom, to exousia this time, democracy contains all the different kinds of constitutions, of regimes or states. . . . Plato already announces that “democracy” is, in the end, neither the name of a regime nor the name of a constitution. It is not a constitutional form among others. (R, 26/V, 48–49)

In its emphasis on freedom, democracy has a structure that is opened up to constant transformation. It thus designates neither a single constitution nor a single regime—the name does not refer to any single form of government. This is one reason Plato has such distaste for democracy, for in its mutability it can have no single, eternal Form. It is also why, Derrida suggests, “there have in fact been, in addition to the monarchical, plutocratic, and tyrannical democracies of antiquity, so many so-called modern democratic regimes” (R, 26–27/V, 49). Almost every government in today’s world calls itself a democracy, regardless of its internal structure. Derrida proposes that this is not just hypocrisy on the part of most (or even all) of these governments, but rather a consequence of the structure of democracy itself. It has no one model, no one form, for it makes possible many.11

Focusing on freedom and the taking turns thus leads Derrida to emphasize an indeterminacy in the concept of democracy. This is, of course, not a new point to make, as is evident in the reference to Plato. Later in “The Reason of the Strongest” Derrida cites similar remarks from Rousseau, who in On the Social Contract writes that no other government “tends so forcefully and continuously to change its form.”12 Rousseau thus also picks out democracy’s mutability as one of its central features. However, where Plato took this to be a sign of weakness, Rousseau, at least as he is read by Derrida, associates it with a strength: “In this revival [relance] of the Platonic philosopheme concerning the plasticity of democracy, Rousseau names (and in two different places) force, the force that forces the form, the force that forces a change in form, and then, right after, the force required of the citizen to remain a democrat despite this unpresentability” (R, 74/V, 108). Derrida’s claim is that for Rousseau the fact that democracy cannot be presented is not a failing on democracy’s part. Rather, it is a sign of the great strength needed by the democrat. Now this is not to say that Rousseau thereby embraces democracy, for he sees the strength needed for democracy to work to be so great that he famously claims, as Derrida highlights, “Were there a people of gods, it would govern itself democratically. So perfect a government is not suited to men.”13 But even if Rousseau shares with Plato an opposition to democracy, a shift has nonetheless taken place in his “revival [relance] of the Platonic philosopheme.”

That this shift takes place should not be all that surprising, for as is signaled by the presence of the word “relance,” Derrida is here describing an act of inheritance of
democracy. Like all such acts, it is not a simple repetition, but contains, as I demonstrated in Chapter 2, a degree of freedom where that which is “relaunched [relancé]” may be relaunched otherwise. In this instance what is perceived by Plato to be a weakness comes to be associated in Rousseau with a strength. Further, the inheritance here taking place involves not only Rousseau and Plato. There is at least one other heir on the scene, namely Derrida himself. In examining the movement of this idea from Plato to Rousseau, Derrida is inheriting from both of them, relaunching it in his turn. The question, therefore, is how Derrida’s understanding of the essential indeterminacy of democracy differs from that of those who have come before him. If Plato sees weakness in democracy’s lack of form, where Rousseau finds strength, what does Derrida perceive?

The answer is that Derrida sees both weakness and strength, for he argues that democracy harbors both a danger and a chance. That is, Derrida inherits according to the scheme I developed in Chapter 2, where he chooses to raise the stakes of what he reveals as aporetic, heightening the tension between the opposing poles of strength and weakness, chance and threat. This strategy of inheritance is revealed most clearly in Derrida’s recourse to the term “autoimmunity,” which occupies a central position in “The Reason of the Strongest.” Derrida uses this notion here and elsewhere to describe democracy’s particular instability, an instability that turns on its lack of form. Autoimmunity is thus key to understanding Derrida’s inheritance of democracy. In order to best articulate what it means, I will first analyze this term’s earlier deployment in Derrida’s writings. Another detour, but one that will return to the heart of Derrida’s understanding of democracy.

“Autoimmunity” makes its first substantial appearance in the 1996 essay “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” a text examining religion’s relationship with technology. There, Derrida argues that this relationship is divided between contradictory yet equally necessary tendencies. On the one hand, he claims that religion is committed to distancing itself from technology, because one of the two sources of religion is the notion of “the unscathed [l’indemne] (the safe and sound, the immune, the holy, the sacred, heilig)” (the other is “faith”) (FK, 93/FS, 88). Religions aim for a purity that is protected from the corrupting influence of the mechanical reproduction of the technical. On the other hand, Derrida also claims that this contamination is at the same time precisely what religions cannot avoid. In their attempt to secure the sacred as sacred (and to establish security in faith), religions must iterate themselves, give themselves over to a repetitive duplicity that further divides their 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” (FK, 100/FS, 99). That is, religions must use technology to stay alive, as is evident in “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.” (FK, 62/FS, 40). In order to survive, religions must therefore act against their own tendency to protect their sacredness. They attack their own protection so as to live on, and it is this action that Derrida labels autoimmune.

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, 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. (FK, 79–80/FS, 67)

Autoimmunity is a paradoxical process whereby an entity attacks its own defenses in order to defend itself. Autoimmunity thus never involves an attack by a self against all of itself, but only against a part of itself. Further, it does not describe an attack against any part of the self, but that particular part that is part of its own protection. This specificity is reinforced by what Derrida cites as the biological sources of the term, where “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” (FK, 80/FS, 67). If, therefore, parts of the self other than its defenses or immune system are attacked (if there are any), then one is no longer talking about a process of autoimmunity, but of something else.

There are two important consequences that follow from the operation of autoimmunity, consequences that evoke old themes in Derrida’s writings. First, it is difficult to maintain any clear distinction between the inside and the outside of an autoimmune entity, between a self and its others. Speaking of the reaction of religion against modern technology, Derrida writes:

This internal and immediate reactivity, at once immunitary and auto-immune, can alone account for what will be called the religious resurgence in its double and contradictory phenomenon. The word resurgence <déferlement> imposes itself upon us to suggest the redoubling of a wave that appropriates even that to which, enfold ing itself, it seems to be opposed—and simultaneously gets carried away itself, sometimes in terror and terrorism, taking with it precisely that which protects it, its own “antibodies.” Allying itself with the enemy, hospitable to the antigens, bearing away the other with itself, this resurgence grows and swells with the power of the adversary. (FK, 81–82/FS, 70)

This highlights the instability between the inside and outside that autoimmunity implies. An attack can no longer be taken on its own as a sign of an external threat. It can just as easily come from within as from without, as one can never know whether that which seems to come from the outside has not been in fact enlisted from within, appropriated as a means for a self to attack itself. Through an autoimmune process a self thus grows and extends itself to incorporate its enemies, precisely through self-attack.
Derrida will follow through these implications right up to the point where it becomes difficult to speak of any coherent “self” here at all.\(^{15}\)

Second, the claim that autoimmunity is at work in religion reconfigures the relationship between life and death in this domain. That the term originates in biology means that life is already on the table. And it is the same kind of life that was at work in my discussion of Derrida’s inheritance of Marx—a life intimately tied to death. According to Derrida, religion operates according to a “mechanical principle [that] is apparently very simple: life has absolute value only if it is worth more than life” (FK, 87/FS, 78).\(^{16}\) Religion thus cannot be seen on the side of life against death (as a principle of absolute respect for life, something readily associated with the religious, might imply), but rather, as that which incorporates “the dead in the living.” At stake is not simply life, but an “excess above and beyond the living,” for autoimmunity always involves a measure of death “in view of some sort of invisible and spectral survival” (FK, 86–87/FS, 78–79). Autoimmunity involves a self putting a part of itself to death in order not to live, but to live-on, and is thus another expression of Derrida’s challenge to accepted understandings of life, death, and survival.

This analysis of autoimmunity at work in religion forms the basis of Derrida’s use of the term in his discussion of democracy. In “The Reason of the Strongest,” as well as in its companion piece, the interview “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” Derrida argues that democracy is best understood according to processes of autoimmunity, and he does so by focusing on two examples from recent democratic history. The first is 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 in fact introduced antidemocratic laws as imagined (something that, as Derrida notes, will never be known), then it would have been the case that democracy democratically passed over into an antidemocratic regime.\(^{17}\) This possibility, Derrida argues, is present for all democracies, for it follows from the fundamental structure of the taking turns. It is always possible that a nondemocratic regime will result from a normal and well-functioning democratic electoral process, since if a party or candidate with an antidemocratic agenda receives enough votes, then it/he/she will arrive to power with democratic legitimacy. “The great question of modern parliamentary and representative democracy, perhaps of all democracy, in this logic of the turn or round, of the other turn or round, of the other time and thus of the other, of the alter in general, is that the alternative to democracy can always be represented as a democratic alternation” (R, 30–31/V, 54).\(^{18}\)

Derrida labels this situation autoimmune, for the possibility of this attack against democracy comes from itself. The threat of an antidemocratic government is produced from the internal workings of democracy. It is thus unclear to what extent those others who would want to pass antidemocratic laws are indeed “other”—one cannot so easily distinguish democracy from its enemies, since the latter here arrive with some
democratic legitimacy. And importantly, they did not come out of nowhere. Derrida inscribes this example of an autoimmune “moment” into a history of similar actions; he argues that it is a part of “a whole series of examples of an autoimmune pervertibility of democracy,” in which the imposition of a colonizing 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 colonizing power first proclaimed ($R$, 34–35/$V$, 59). This example is thus situated in a long historical chain.

Equally important is the fact that this chain also extends into the future. Confronting the projected threat of Islamic fundamentalism, democracy attacked itself though the suspension of elections: “The Algerian government and a large part, although not a majority, of the Algerian people (as well as people outside Algeria) . . . thus preferred to put an end to [democracy] themselves. They decided in a sovereign fashion to suspend, at least provisionally, democracy for its own good, so as to take care of it, so as to immunize it against a much worse and very likely assault” ($R$, 33/$V$, 57). Here too autoimmunity is 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 perceived threat to democracy coming 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 seen to be a form of defense against what was seen to be an even greater threat.

Derrida thus uses the case of Algeria to demonstrate one of the ways that autoimmunity operates in democracy. 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 invokes are the attacks of September 11.

It is perhaps because the United States has a culture and a system of law that are largely democratic that it was able to open itself up and expose its greatest vulnerability to immigrants, to, for example, pilots in training, experienced and suicidal “terrorists” who, before turning against others but also against themselves the aerial bombs that they had become, and before hurling them by hurling themselves into the two World Trade Towers, were trained on the sovereign soil of the United States, under the nose of the CIA and the FBI, perhaps not without some autoimmune consent on the part of an administration with at once more and less foresight than one tends to think when it is faced with what is claimed to be a major, unforeseeable event. ($R$, 40/$V$, 65)

This example differs from that of the Algerian elections, since it is not a question here of democracy’s openness to a plurality of forms of government. Rather, the root of the problem lies in democracy’s openness to others. 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 support of those who were to turn against it. But despite 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 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 that could also be described as “a whole series of examples of an autoimmune pervertibility of democracy,” in which the troops trained by the United States to fight against what is seen to be the antidemocratic threat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan return to attack these same United States.20 So again the threat did not suddenly appear, but emerged over a long period more or less internal to democracy. And here too this history of autoimmunity also extends into the future. After September 11 “we see an American administration, potentially followed by others in Europe and in the rest of the world, claiming that in the war it is waging against the ‘axis of evil,’ against the enemies of freedom and the assassins of democracy throughout the world, it must restrict within its own country certain so-called democratic freedoms and the exercise of certain rights by, for example, increasing the powers of police investigations and interrogations, without anyone, any democrat, being really able to oppose such measures” (R, 40/V, 64–65). Thus again there is a perceived threat to a democracy (this time in the form of the threat of future attacks against the United States) that leads this democracy to attack a part of itself (the suspension of certain democratic rights and freedoms) 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 other and more dangerous than itself.

Derrida thus claims that autoimmunity is at work in both the Algerian elections of 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 autoimmunity. Importantly, Derrida argues that these examples do not describe external accidents that befall these particular democracies, events that could be avoided if only Algeria or the United States were a bit more democratic. Democracy contains within it the possibility of welcoming an undemocratic regime, and of inviting terrorist attacks, as well as the possibility of producing another attack against itself in an attempt to divert these threats. For Derrida this process of autoimmunity is thus an essential aspect at work in the very notion of democracy.

This view receives further justification when Derrida moves the discussion to a more theoretical level and reinvigorates a term long at work in his oeuvre, “renvoyer”—resending: a sending away, sending back (to the source), and/or sending on. Renvoyer appeared in Chapter 2 when I discussed Derrida’s description of inheritance as a “relaunching otherwise.” Here Derrida emphasizes how the renvoi follows the logic of spacing—the “becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space” (R, 35/V, 60)—which I showed also to be at work in inheritance. First, “in space, the autoimmune topology always dictates that democracy be sent off [renvoyer] elsewhere, that it be excluded or rejected, expelled under the pretext of protecting it on the inside by
expelling, rejecting, or sending off [renvoyant] to the outside the domestic enemies of democracy” (R, 35–36/V, 60). Democracy thus protects itself by sending its domestic enemies into exile, reinforcing the point that these enemies are internal to democracy itself. This reflex is a reaction against democracy’s openness to others, and is illustrated in the modifications to immigration and naturalization policies made by governments around the world after September 11. Second, “since the renvoi operates in time as well, autoimmunity also calls for putting off [renvoyer] until later the elections and the advent of democracy” (R, 36/V, 61). Here, the sending operates temporally through delaying democratic reforms and elections until the time is “safer” for democracy. This was the case in Algeria in 1992, and continues in many places in the world today, where elections are deferred in the name of protecting democracy in the long term.

It is this action of resending that Derrida uses to formulate in his own manner the Platonic insight with which this analysis began, namely that there is no essence to democracy, no self that democracy can properly be.

This double renvoi (sending off—or to—the other and putting off, adjournment) is an autoimmune necessity inscribed right onto [à même] democracy, right onto the concept of a democracy without concept, a democracy devoid of sameness and ipseity, a democracy whose concept remains free, like a disengaged clutch, free-wheeling, in the free play of its indetermination; it is inscribed right onto this thing or this cause that, precisely under the name of democracy, is never properly what it is, never itself. For what is lacking in democracy is proper meaning, the very [même] meaning of the selfsame [même] (ipse, metipse, metipsissimus, meisme), the it-self [soi-même], the selfsame, the properly selfsame of the it-self. Democracy is defined, as is the very ideal of democracy, by this lack of the proper and the selfsame. (R, 36–37/V, 61)

One can thus see how autoimmunity underlies Derrida’s inheritance of the Platonic conception of democracy. As autoimmune, there is no coherent idea of democracy, since it is always in a process of attacking itself—incorporating what is outside or turning parts of itself against itself. But this does not lead to the total destruction of democracy, its annihilation or suicide. Rather, it is through this process that democracy remains alive, living on. There is, therefore, a fundamental ambivalence in democracy. One cannot straightforwardly denounce these violent self-attacks, these seemingly undemocratic moments in democratic history, for Derrida’s claim is that they are essential to democracy’s survival. Without them, Derrida suggests, what might be seen as good in democracy could never be.

But what of this good? So far I have only discussed events taking place that many democrats would see as negative. And while part of the force of Derrida’s analysis lies in the implication that these events are not wholly negative, since they are implicated in democracy’s survival, if this is all it can produce one might wonder what value there is in keeping it alive in the first place. The next question to ask is therefore whether Derrida’s understanding of democracy also accounts for those possibilities and events
that are usually seen as more desirable. It does, and the particular positive characteristic that Derrida underlines is what he calls democracy’s perfectibility. Democracy, Derrida argues, is not only autoimmune in that it turns against itself through being open to others, both in its government and at its borders, and sometimes brings to pass the very threats these others pose. Democracy also turns against itself through calling itself into question, critiquing itself and perfecting itself. This is a central part of what Derrida means by democracy to come.

The expression “democracy to come” takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility. Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name. Including the idea of the constitutional paradigm and the absolute authority of law. It is thus the only paradigm that is universalizable, whence its chance and its fragility. (R, 86–87/V, 126–27)\(^2\)

In this passage Derrida again links democracy’s lack of stability, its ever-changing and fluid form, to the process of autoimmunity. But in contrast to what I have discussed above, this is here cast in terms that many would see as a positive thing, where democracy can improve precisely by attacking parts of itself through self-critique. One example of such a movement is the expansion of democratic rights. As Derrida states earlier in “The Reason of the Strongest,” democracy “is interminable in its incompletion beyond all the limitations in areas as different as the right to vote (for example in its extension to women—but starting when?—to minors—but starting at what age?—or to foreigners—but which ones and on what lands?—to cite at random just a few exemplary problems from among so many other similar ones), the freedom of the press, the end of social inequalities throughout the world, the right to work, or any number of other rights” (R, 38–39/V, 63).\(^2\) The exclusion of different groups from the right to vote follows precisely a logic that aims to defend democracy from what are seen to be dangerous elements. Overcoming such exclusions therefore would be instances in which democracy attacks its own defenses. This example also makes sense of Derrida’s invocation above of democracy’s universalizability. The universalizing movement of expanding democratic inclusiveness is accounted for by the autoimmune process—democracy attacks itself by suspending some of its limitations in order to keep itself alive.

Autoimmunity thus involves not only the occurrence of what are traditionally seen as antidemocratic measures. It also accounts for what many would regard as prodemocratic, such as the expansion of democratic rights in an ever-increasing inclusiveness. However, it is at this point that the radicality of Derrida’s position emerges, since it is precisely such ascriptions of anti- and pro- that his analysis starts to trouble. I stated above that the so-called negative aspects of autoimmunity in fact have an ambivalent value, insofar as they name an essential possibility of democracy’s keeping itself alive.
Similarly, the solely positive value of prodemocratic actions is also challenged, for to say that democracy welcomes self-critique, and to see this in the opening of boundaries to include those formerly excluded, is to underline the hospitality in democracy.\textsuperscript{23} But as was shown in Chapter 1 and in the above analysis of autoimmunity, such openness to an outside is simultaneously an openness to danger—it is both democracy’s chance and its fragility. This is an unavoidable possibility inhabiting every relation to alterity. Thus the fact of democracy’s openness to self-critique and improvement is at the same time a fact of its openness to what might harm and damage it. Of course, as I also argued in Chapter 1, a complete openness is impossible, meaning that hospitality is always conditional. But this just means that exclusions are an inevitable part of every inclusion, which is why Derrida states that democracy “is interminable in its incompleteness.” Every decision to include will itself have to draw boundaries (“starting when? . . . starting at what age? . . . which ones and on what lands?”), and so no movement of the extension of rights is itself free from exclusion. And one cannot succeed in profiting from the inevitability of exclusion by sorting between the good and bad others, admitting the first and excluding the second, since certainty in any such classification is denied by the logic of autoimmunity. Attacks may come equally from within as from without, and so the ability to distinguish friend from enemy is always in question. All of which is to say that the perfectibility of democracy cannot be affirmed as wholly positive. With its source in the autoimmune, this ability of democracy to improve itself through self-critique is at the same time an ability to undermine itself as well. The chance in democracy is inseparable from the risk.

Further perspective on this ambivalence is gained by reflecting on Derrida’s occasional invocations in this context of a word mentioned above in my discussion of the promise, khōra. Khōra is used by Plato in Timaeus for the “matrix” or “womb” in which the Forms are given their shape. It is thus beyond the Forms, a figure beyond being, and for this reason any translation of this word is inadequate. Derrida’s own interpretation—his own inheritance—of Timaeus “had named khōra (which means \textit{locality} in general, spacing, interval) another place without age, another ‘taking place,’” and he suggests that “democracy to come would be like the khōra of the political” (R, xiv, 82/V, 14, 120).

What are the consequences of this connection? One can better see its implications by looking at the role that khōra plays in Derrida’s other writings. Predominantly, Derrida uses khōra as an alternative to the Platonic Good. The latter too is beyond being (\textit{epekeina tēs ousias}) as Plato famously states in Republic, but it lies above, at the summit, as the highest unity in relation to which all of the Forms take their orientation. Further, the Good provides the guiding principle for the construction of Plato’s ideal political community. Politics in the Platonic tradition is thus founded on the Good, and it is the model for most subsequent political theologies. This also explains why Plato condemns democracy, since this is a type of government that is foreign to the Forms and the Good. Derrida’s reading of khōra is notable as an attempt to uncover
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an alternative way of thinking politics at the origin of the Platonic tradition. It is an
inheritance, otherwise, of this tradition. In contrast to the unity provided by the Good,
a unity that passes to the political community, “khōra never presents itself as such. It is
neither Being, nor the Good, nor God, nor Man, nor History. It will always resist them,
will always have been . . . the very place of an infinite resistance, of an infinitely impos-
sible persistence <restance>: an utterly faceless other” (FK, 58–59/FS, 35). Khōra is yet
another figure in the Derridean lexicon for a resistance to presence.

Derrida thus proposes putting khōra in the place of the Good, but he does not
thereby wish to found a new politics on this base. In khōra’s emptiness the logic of
founding is contested—“no ethics, no politics, and no law can be, as it were, deduced
from this thought. To be sure, nothing can be done [faire] with it. And so one would
have nothing to do with it.” No rules or guidelines for action follow from a thinking
of khōra. However, continuing, Derrida asks, “But should we then conclude that this
thought leaves no trace on what is to be done—for example in the politics, the ethics, or
the law to come?” (R, xv/V, 14–15) With this he suggests that there is a trace here to be
thought, an effect that is not a relation of founding and founded, but an effect nonetheless.
This is precisely the kind of effect he sees occurring with the invocation of democ-

cracy to come. As “the khōra of the political” democracy to come is not a model for a


regime, a structure from which one can deduce an ethics, politics, and law. Rather, it is
an unstable site that resists mastery, both in its meaning and in any attempt to assign it
absolute value. Democracy remains both a chance and a threat, offering no assurance
that what comes from it will be good.

The fundamental ambivalence in democracy’s perfectibility raises questions about
the normative status of Derrida’s claims, something I explore in the following chap-

ter. But for now I wish to stay on the path I have been following concerning Derrida’s
understanding of democracy to come. At the beginning of this chapter I argued that
Derrida’s description of democracy to come as the inheritance of a promise suggests
that it is aporetic, involves an essential dimension of nonknowledge, is unstable in
its name, and promises both a chance and a threat. The dimension of nonknowledge
in democracy follows from its absence of fixed form, and autoimmunity implies the
coexistence of both chance and threat. Two of the characteristics of a promise have
thus been demonstrated. What of the other two? As might be expected, democracy
on Derrida’s understanding can indeed be called aporetic in a number of ways. First,
autoimmunity can be articulated in terms of aporetic structures. This is evident in my
discussion above of the role played by hospitality in the examples of Algeria and Sep-

tember 11, as well as in democracy’s openness to self-critique and its universalizability.
Autoimmunity is aporetic because it is precisely engaged in the tension between con-
ditional limits and the unconditional, between the need to calculate those who belong
within and the incalculability of an openness to all. Further, throughout “The Reason
of the Strongest” Derrida speaks just as much of aporias as of the autoimmune process,
and he notes that he could
inscribe the category of the autoimmune into the series of both older and more recent discourses on the double bind and the aporia. Although aporia, double bind, and autoimmune process are not exactly synonyms, what they have in common, what they are all, precisely, charged with, is, more than an internal contradiction, an indecidability, that is, an internal-external, nondialectizable antinomy that risks paralyzing and thus calls for the event of the interruptive decision. (R, 35/V, 59–60)

Although he does not make a strict identification, and cannot because of the difficulties I discussed in Chapter 1 of naming such structures, Derrida does here acknowledge the close relationship between autoimmunity and aporias.

The substitutability of these terms is in play in a second aporia at work in Derrida’s analysis of democracy, that found in his treatment of the tension between freedom and equality. Reading Jean-Luc Nancy’s The Experience of Freedom, Derrida evokes one of the central problems of political philosophy, namely

the persistence, the ineluctable return, in truth, of a sort of aporia or, if you prefer, of an antinomy at the heart of every -nomy, that is, at the source of every autoimmune process. This antinomy at the heart of the democratic has long been recognized. It is classical and canonical; it is the one between freedom and equality—that constitutive and diabolical couple of democracy. I would translate this into my own language by saying that equality tends to introduce measure and calculation (and thus conditionality) whereas freedom is by essence unconditional, indivisible, heterogeneous to calculation and measure. (R, 47–48/V, 74)

Freedom and equality are here transposed into the familiar Derridean language of conditionality and unconditionality (which, just as with the promise, he aligns with the couple calculable/incalculable), suggesting that this classic problem of democratic theory arises in the attempt to reconcile these two heterogeneous demands. Equality is thus presented as the measure or leveling down of an immeasurable freedom. Now Derrida, through his reading of Nancy, immediately complicates this schema, arguing that the same aporia is in fact at work within equality. I will leave aside the details of this argument, since it is not my direct concern. What is important to note is that Derrida argues for the aporetic status of democracy via a claim of the aporetic status of freedom and equality.24

In addition to the autoimmune and the relation between freedom and equality, “The Reason of the Strongest” contains a third ascription of aporia to democracy, one that occurs in a characteristic moment of Derridean hyperbole. Speaking of his use of “to come” in conjunction with democracy, Derrida writes:

The “to come” not only points to the promise but suggests that democracy will never exist, in the sense of a present existence: not because it will be deferred but because it will always remain aporetic in its structure (force without force, incalculable singularity and calculable equality, commensurability and incommensurability, heteronomy and autonomy, indivisible sovereignty and divisible or shared sovereignty,
an empty name, a despairing messianicity or a messianicity in despair, and so on). (R, 86/V, 126)

The couples mentioned here in parentheses mark some, but not even all, of the aporias that Derrida claims can be found in democracy. Thus on Derrida’s understanding democracy is aporetic, and in this respect it conforms to his characterization of a promise. There is now one final point to examine on the list of traits carried by promises as articulated in “Avances,” namely the instability of the name. This last feature follows rather straightforwardly from the instability in the concept of democracy, something I have already investigated at some length. As aporetic and autoimmune, the concept of democracy remains unmasterable, resistant to any attempt to fully determine its meaning. Indeed, part of the movement of autoimmunity is directed against this meaning itself, hollowing it out to the point where there seems very little content left except for a hospitality to others and to its own transformation. This then raises the question of what justifies labeling this structure “democracy” at all. Why give it this name and not another? There is no fully satisfactory answer to this question, for Derrida could have called it something else, as he acknowledged in an interview in 1989.

Perhaps the term democracy is not a good term. For now it’s the best term I’ve found. But, for example, one day I gave a lecture at Johns Hopkins on these things and a student said to me, “What you call democracy is what Hannah Arendt calls republic in order to place it in opposition to democracy.” Why not? I am only employing the term democracy in a sentence or a discourse that determines certain things. I think that in the discursive context that dominates politics today, the choice of the term that appears in the majority of sentences in this discourse is a good choice—it’s the least lousy possible. As a term, however, that’s not sacred. I can, some day or another, say, “No, it’s not the right term. The situation allows or demands that we use another term in other sentences.” For now, it’s the best term for me. And choosing this term is obviously a political choice. It’s a political action.

Derrida states that there is nothing necessary about the invocation of democracy in his work, which is to say that he chooses to use this name, a choice justified through appeal to strategic political value. Thus, even while he concedes that perhaps “republic” might be a better name in another context, as well as reserving the right to leave “democracy” behind, he believes that the name “democracy” resonates in a particularly useful way with the dominant political discourse of his day. As mentioned above, democracy is the name to which virtually every existing political regime appeals. Carrying such force in present discourse, Derrida’s attempt to transform what is heard in the word (the resonance of “to come”) is an intervention into the heart of politics today.

The justification for choosing democracy thus lies in a diagnosis of the present state of political affairs and in the judgment that this name remains of strategic use for an intervention into this state. In this way Derrida’s appeal to the name of democracy evokes both the present and the future—the present of today, and the future.
of tomorrow toward that which his intervention would bring about. This particular temporal emphasis is reinforced in remarks immediately following those cited above. Responding to Michael Sprinker's question, “Would you object to calling what you have been referring to as democracy to come what in the Marxist lexicon would be called the classless society?” Derrida states, “Why not, if the concept of class is totally reconstituted, noting the reservations I formulated a while ago with regard to the concept of class? What’s important in ‘democracy to come’ is not ‘democracy,’ but ‘to come.’ That is, a thinking of the event, of what comes.” In discounting the term “democracy” Derrida discounts the dimension of the past, for it is the past that is evoked in the invocation of this name. “To come” stands open in the present toward an unknown future, while “democracy” brings with it a whole history of meaning. Saying that the former is what matters is thus to elide the force of this history.

However, to my mind Derrida's response to this question is incorrect, for in it he denies the strategic importance of “democracy” that he had just affirmed. The substitution of “the classless society” for “democracy to come” would be a different intervention into the politics of today, for these terms resonate in different ways. In other words, it is not only the present and the future that are in play in Derrida’s appeal to “democracy to come,” but equally the past—more precisely the past containing the many connotations of “democracy,” the multiple, contradictory, indeed aporetic meanings that echo from the past into the present when this term is invoked. Which is to say that “democracy” is not just a name, but an inherited name. It is not a simply a promise, but, as I have discussed, “the inheritance of a promise.” Thus the strategic value of speaking of a “democracy to come” lies not just in the future of the “to come,” that promise of an open future that is evoked in democracy’s hospitality. Equally, “democracy” offers resources for strategic interventions in the present because of what lies in its past, and in the relation to this past which is a relation of inheritance. It is to this relation that I now turn.

Democracy as Inheritance

Much of what I want to say concerning the relation between democracy and inheritance has been asserted implicitly throughout this chapter. First, it should be apparent that democracy qualifies as a legacy on Derrida’s understanding of inheritance. Recall that in Specters of Marx Derrida speaks of “the radical and necessary heterogeneity of an inheritance, the difference without opposition that has to mark it” (SOM, 16/SDM, 40). I interpreted this statement to mean that for Derrida legacies are always aporetic, and I have just shown at some length how democracy is aporetic in its structure. Democracy is thus a legacy in this respect. Relatedly, another characteristic of legacies is their spatiotemporal structure, which conformed to the logic of spacing. Here, too, democracy qualifies. This can be seen first in the link noted above between democracy and the action of the renvoi, via Derrida’s theorization of autoimmunity: “The figure of the renvoi belongs to the schema of space and time, to what I had thematized with such
insistence long ago under the name *spacing* as the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space* (R, 35/V, 60). That is, the resending operating in democracy’s autoimmunity follows a logic of spacing, and it is this logic that Derrida ultimately inscribes on democracy in order to mark its fundamental lack of identity and self-coincidence. Second, spacing can also be found at work in democracy in the particular pattern of alternation between past and future that I highlighted in the last chapter under the description of a “time out of joint.” Thus Derrida writes that democracy “is what it is only by spacing itself beyond being and even beyond ontological difference; it is (without being) equal and proper to itself only insofar as it is inadequate and improper, at the same time behind and ahead of itself” (R, 38/V, 63). Here again is the intertwining of space and time which results in a certain disorientation whereby democracy cannot be seen to lie fully behind or fully ahead of any present moment.

Thus according to Derrida’s analysis, democracy exhibits two of the central characteristics of a legacy—it has an aporetic structure and follows the spatiotemporal logic of spacing. As a consequence, democracy is able to be inherited, on Derrida’s understanding of the word. Now this is perhaps an uninteresting claim to make, even given the particular characteristics Derrida theorizes inheritance to have. I argued in the last chapter that every aporetic concept is inherited, and “democracy” would thus just be one more name in the long list of aporias that Derrida has examined across his career. However, this is not all that can be said on the matter, and a stronger claim concerning democracy and inheritance can be uncovered in Derrida’s work. It is implicit in a passage cited above from “The Reason of the Strongest” concerning democracy’s perfectibility, which I here repeat.

The expression “democracy to come” takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility. Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name. Including the idea of the constitutional paradigm and the absolute authority of law. It is thus the only paradigm that is universalizable, whence its chance and its fragility. (R, 86–87/V, 126–27)

I have already discussed the link made in this passage between autoimmunity and the right to self-critique and perfectibility. Self-critique can be viewed as part of the autoimmune process, as democracy attacking a part of itself in order to live on, which tempers the positive value evoked by the ascription of perfectibility. Here I want to focus on the implications of Derrida’s claim that democracy is the only system or constitutional paradigm to act in this way. In asserting this, Derrida is identifying the right to self-critique as a characteristic essential to democracy, and to nothing else. But what is it for democracy to critique itself? In linking it to democracy’s “intrinsic historicity,” the right to criticize “its concept, its history, and its name,” Derrida suggests that self-critique lies in democracy’s relation to its past. It is thus a very short step to
identify this relation as a relation of inheritance. The action of self-critique in democracy would thereby be an action of inheritance, that sorting through the multiple and contradictory strands of past meaning that inhabit any present understanding. And insofar as self-critique is identified as essential to democracy, the same must be said of inheritance. Inheritance is thus required by democracy, and by no other political system. In this way Derrida not only theorizes the inheritance of democracy, something shared with so many other words and concepts. His writings also contain the seeds of an account of democracy as inheritance.

What does this mean, to see democracy as inheritance? It first of all grants inheritance the status of being a democratic action. Inheriting is presented as something essential to democracy; indeed, given the poverty of the meaning of democracy on Derrida’s understanding, it may be one of the only such things. According to Derrida’s analysis, democracy possesses very few characteristics other than an openness to critique and transformation through an engagement with its past. Every negotiation with the aporias mentioned above that constitute the meaning of democracy can be inscribed within this scheme. To engage with the dual imperatives of freedom and equality, for example, is to do so with the inherited practices and meanings associated with these concepts.

However, given what I argued in Chapter 2, this identification of inheritance with democratic action may well give one pause. Recall that for Derrida inheritance is necessary. He states in Specters of Marx that “the being of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not” (SOM, 54/SDM, 94), and in For What Tomorrow that “what characterizes inheritance is first of all that one does not choose it; it is what violently elects us” (FW, 3/DQ, 15–16). Having no choice but to inherit, where inheritance is a democratic action, one would thus seem to be automatically democratic in one’s very being—a claim that cannot be correct, or, if it were, is too strong to be of any use. But I also argued in Chapter 2 that not every aspect of inheritance is a necessity. There is a space for choice, namely in the way an heir chooses to respond to the necessity of inheritance, in the particular sorting and filtering one undertakes when elected by a legacy. In this space emerged Derrida’s own suggestion for how to inherit, which was the promotion of the most living aspect of a legacy, that part of it most open to change and transformation. Further, examining Derrida’s own practice of inheritance, I argued that this involved a raising of the stakes (surencchère) of the irresolvable tensions in a legacy, an exposure of its aporetic structure. In this way Derrida’s writings on inheritance articulate not just the necessary aspects of this unavoidable situation, but a normative schema outlining how he thinks an heir should act in the face of such necessity.

Including this normative dimension allows one to better understand what might be meant by democracy as inheritance. It legitimates the “short step” mentioned above needed to identify inheritance with the right to self-critique, for although Derrida sees a central feature of democracy in this right, it is not the case that every self-critique
automatically qualifies as democratic. In other words, not every act of inheritance will be a democratic act. But among those acts that do qualify would be ones following the normative dimension of Derridean inheritance. This would be to up the ante on the aporetic tensions in the legacies of democracy, thereby opening them up to further change and transformation. And this is precisely what Derrida does in his own inheritance of democracy. This has already been shown in my reading of “The Reason of the Strongest,” where Derrida strives to expose the aporetic structures of what had been previously covered over. But it is also apparent in the processes of filtering and selection that Derrida applies more generally to the history of democratic thought. As Matthias Fritsch notes, Derrida does not simply embrace any and all aspects of the democratic tradition but remains selective in what he chooses to promote. “It seems undeniable that Derrida’s reformulation of democracy does not affirm just any form of political organization, and not even just any strains and interpretations of democratic heritage. For example, Derrida’s democracy to come appears much less defined by popular sovereignty, equality, and majority rule—although Derrida recognizes their importance—than by free speech, openness to criticism and otherness, and hospitality to singularity.”

Each of the elements that Fritsch rightly identifies as being central to Derrida’s understanding of democracy involves an opening up to further change through the identification of an aporia. Free speech involves a right to say anything at all, which is at the same time impossible, since there are always limitations on what can be said in any given context. If one holds oneself open to criticizing everything, even the possibility of criticism itself, this also means that not everything can be criticized at once. And hospitality to singularity is always caught between a responsibility to the unique and to the general. The themes that Derrida consistently chooses from the democratic tradition are thus implicated in the structure of aporia I have emphasized throughout. In his negotiations with these aporias, Derrida always aims to maintain their tension, in contrast to the responses of those he reads who aim to resolve the tension in favor of one arm or the other.

The identification of democracy with inheritance is thus not as broad as it might first seem, since not all actions of inheritance would qualify as democratic. But I am suggesting that the more specific sense of inheritance that Derrida endorses—covering not just its necessary elements, but those he counsels that an heir should choose—does fit the bill, since it involves an increase in the openness to transformation that he sees as central to democracy. This being the case, one can make sense of one of Derrida’s more extravagant claims concerning democracy. As I noted in the last chapter, this expanded sense of inheritance can be taken as a definition of deconstruction, as suggested by Derrida himself when he states, “This is one of the possible definitions of deconstruction—as inheritance.” Coupling this statement with my claim of reading democracy as inheritance, one can thus justify Derrida’s statement in Politics of Friendship that “one keeps this indefinite right to the question, to criticism, to deconstruction (guaranteed rights, in principle, in any democracy: no deconstruction
without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction)” (PF, 105/PA, 128). Democracy and deconstruction are brought together precisely through their common link to inheritance.31

My description of democracy as inheritance is thus restricted by the specific understanding of the latter here in play. Nonetheless, it is still the case that this formulation remains open to expansion because of the indetermination in Derrida’s understanding of democracy. In the key passage from “The Reason of the Strongest” cited above Derrida maintains his avoidance of identifying democracy as a particular “regime,” speaking instead of its being a “system” and a “paradigm.” This is a part of his inheritance of the Platonic view that democracy has no single Form, such that it is seen to be able to give rise to many political configurations. As a consequence, the exclusivity to democracy of the action of inheritance does not rule out the possibility that political regimes that are not thus named might also share in this trait. Rather, insofar as they do inherit, then they can be labeled “democratic” in this respect. In other words, a regime would be democratic to the extent that it inherits from its past, critiquing and transforming itself through a certain engagement with its own history. This would allow the use of alternative terms, as is suggested in my earlier citation of the 1989 interview “Politics and Friendship” where Derrida acknowledges the possibility of speaking not of democracy but of “republic” or “classless society,” provided they conform to this requirement and are seen to be strategically superior.

At the same time, however, this possibility of describing as democratic those regimes not initially sharing in this name is not without limit. In particular, there are certain other political systems or ideologies against which Derrida consistently opposes “democracy to come.” For example, in “Politics and Friendship,” immediately after the remarks I cited, Derrida claims that

nondemocratic systems are above all systems that close and close themselves off from this coming of the other. They are systems of homogenization and of integral calculation. In the end and beyond all the classical critique of fascist, Nazi, and totalitarian violence in general, one can say that these are systems that close the “to come” and that close themselves into the presentation of the presentable.32

Similarly, in the later interview “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” Derrida opposes a certain kind of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism by stating:

What appears to me unacceptable in the “strategy” . . . of the “bin Laden effect” is not only the cruelty, the disregard for human life, the disrespect for law, for women, the use of what is worst in technocapitalist modernity for the purposes of religious fanaticism. No, it is, above all, the fact that such actions and such discourse open onto no future and, in my view, have no future . . . . Nothing of what has been so laboriously secularized in the forms of the “political,” of “democracy,” of “international law,” and even in the nontheological form of sovereignty . . . none of this seems to have any place whatsoever in the discourse “bin Laden.” That is why, in this
unleashing of violence without name, if I had to take one of the two sides and choose in a binary situation, well, I would.\textsuperscript{31}

Both of these passages suggest a separation of terms, between a democracy that would open out onto some kind of future, and a totalitarianism and fundamentalism that cannot be thus characterized.

Now the justification that Derrida gives in these passages for his siding with democracy against certain other regimes is on the face of it inadequate. This is because it is incorrect, for reasons that Derrida himself provides, to claim that the latter “close the ‘to come,’” “open onto no future,” or “have no future,” understood literally. At the most general level, Derrida’s entire oeuvre is dedicated to demonstrating the inability of any conceptual construct to instantiate full closure in the face of alterity—\textit{différence} is at work at the heart of all concepts, undermining their own ability to be fully self-present and so closed into “the presentation of the presentable.” This is a theoretical impossibility in the strictest sense. More specifically, Derrida’s own analysis in “The Reason of the Strongest” and in “Autoimmunity” shows why one cannot so easily distinguish democracy or democracy to come, on the one hand, from fascism, totalitarianism, or religious fundamentalism, on the other. As highlighted in my account of the logic of autoimmunity, Derrida focuses on two distinct phenomena, the coming into power of nondemocratic governments through democratic elections and the attacks of September 11. Derrida writes that the first is a possibility always present in democracy: “The \textit{alternative to democracy can always be represented as a democratic alternation}” (\textit{R}, 31/\textit{V}, 54), and appeals to the coming into power precisely of Islamic fundamentalist, fascist, and totalitarian regimes as examples of this. This inscribes these supposed “others” as possibilities arising out of democracy, owing to the work of the autoimmune. Similarly, Derrida points out that those who attacked the World Trade Center were in many ways the products of U.S. training and support. Again, this is to argue that democracy’s supposed opposite, here those who would be grouped under the “bin Laden effect,” arise as a possibility from within democracy itself.

These analyses undermine the distinction Derrida makes between democracy and its others according to a simple opposition of openness or closure to the future. All regimes and political systems are necessarily open, and Derrida’s own work shows how such clean lines of separation cannot be maintained. Derrida is thus wrong to claim that these other positions—those of totalitarianism and fundamentalism—have no future. In their very constitution, and in their relationship to democracy or democracy to come, these supposed others share in the future. And how could it be otherwise? How could one be so sure of the future, understood as openness itself, to know that certain ideologies have no part of it? If democracy can give rise to these undesirable regimes, how can one know that the reverse cannot take place?

However, one can retain something of the distinction Derrida here desires by reading these statements with the interpretation of the “to come” that I have proposed. To do so one would have to show that within these other regimes there is an absence of
a deconstructive engagement with the past, where aporetic tensions are denied or covered over. Demonstrating this is not my present concern, although I think it would not be too difficult to do. For example, in his famous essay “The Question of Democracy,” which perhaps had no small influence on Derrida’s own views, Claude Lefort writes:

> We must recognize that, so long as the democratic adventure continues, so long as the terms of the contradiction continue to be displaced, the meaning of what is coming into being remains in suspense. Democracy thus proves to be the historical society par excellence, a society which, in its very form, welcomes and preserves indeterminacy and which provides a remarkable contrast with totalitarianism which, because it is constructed under the slogan of creating a new man, claims to understand the law of its organization and development, and which, in the modern world, secretly designates itself as a society without history.\(^{34}\)

Lefort here contrasts democracy with totalitarianism precisely in terms of each society’s relation to its own history, and it is in this relation that the indeterminacy of democracy is to be understood. My suggestion is that something similar can be read in Derrida’s contrast between democracy to come and totalitarianism (and Islamic fundamentalism), provided the “to come” is understood not as a simple openness to the future, but as a stance generated by a practice of inheritance as endorsed by Derrida beyond its necessity. Following this claim one can thus maintain an indeterminacy in the scope of what can be called democracy on Derrida’s understanding, such that it could be applied to regimes traditionally called other names, with certain totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes still remaining beyond its bounds. This exclusion would not be absolute, for it could be the case that such regimes come to inherit from their past, and so take on this specific democratic characteristic. It would thus still be incorrect to say that they “have no future,” if what is meant by this that they contain no possibility of opening up a “to come” in the future through an act of inheritance.

Thus politics under the sign of democracy to come is not left devoid of content, a completely open space within which anything goes. Rather, democracy to come names a kind of political action involving a very specific engagement with the past, in which the aporias of past democratic thinking are inherited through an intensification of their tensions. This shows that democracy to come is marked by the resources lying already within the democratic tradition, resources that both enable and constrain the shape that democracy might take at any given time. In this way, emphasizing inheritance counterbalances the emptiness that an obsession with the future might thereby privilege, an obsession the “to come” could be well seen to encourage. Derrida himself tends to privilege the futurity in democracy, most often through emphasizing its passive dimension, a waiting without anticipation, horizon, or projection. He does this because he wants to underline the incalculability in democracy, and so must argue against any kind of decision taken in advance that would reduce democracy to a calculation, program, or rule. And as I noted in my Introduction, while there is some acknowledgment in the secondary literature that the past has a role to play in
the notion of democracy to come, it is almost always left to one side as the analysis unfolds. I hope now it is clear in what way the past is central to Derrida’s theorization of democracy. In addition to invoking an openness to the future, Derrida’s writings on democracy also contain the injunction to inherit, and so one is reminded that the passive dimension in democracy to come does not entail doing nothing at all. There is a lot to do, for there is a call to examine democracy’s history, its historicity, to negotiate this history and all that it produces. In doing this one will not fall into the trap of denying responsibility and following a calculation or a rule, precisely because the history of democracy is a history of aporias, which can never be resolved once and for all. Clearly defined rules for action, for better or worse, are not there to be found. Democracy to come is not only to come, it is inherited to come; indeed, it is only through inheritance that it can be to come at all. As Derrida states in another context, “Axiom: no to-come without inheritance [héritage] and the possibility of repeating” (FK, 83/FS, 72).

Even with this established, however, there still remain questions concerning the Derridean position I have developed. First, one might wonder just what the status is of Derrida’s normative claims, those elements of his theorization of inheritance that I have argued are not necessary, but chosen, and are at the heart of the link between inheritance and democracy. I have emphasized throughout that in promoting a vision of democracy that embraces change and transformation, Derrida at the same time must divorce it from conceptions of the good. Democracy, thus understood, remains fundamentally ambivalent in its value. This being the case, do the normative claims in Derrida’s account have any legitimate support? Why should one promote democracy above anything else, given that there is no assurance that it will promote what is good? Second, even having asserted the link between democracy and inheritance, the details of how this inheritance might take place, which would justify describing it as democratic, still remain to be determined. What would an example of democratic inheritance look like, one that illustrates the position I ascribe to Derrida? It is these questions that I address in the following two chapters.
I have advanced an interpretation of Derrida’s writings arguing that inheritance can be understood as a democratic action. Inheritance here is taken not to mean just any reception of the past, but a particular strategy of engagement in which the aporias in traditional democratic thought are exposed and amplified. This strategy is what Derrida himself promotes through the specific choices he advocates in inheritance, choices that coincide with his own practice of reading, deconstruction. One can thus see that Derrida’s work contains a normative dimension—he values one way of inheriting over others, and this valuation is not necessary. Given the link I have established between inheritance and democracy, one can also make sense of Derrida’s siding with democracy, as opposed to totalitarianism and Islamic fundamentalism, discussed at the end of the last chapter. Derrida can promote democracy for the reason that it is the only system that inscribes, in its concept, the particular kind of self-critique that is deconstruction.

My interpretation, however, raises a fundamental question concerning the desirability of this reason, for it is also the case that Derrida’s analysis uncovers a profound ambivalence at the heart of democracy. To promote openness to change and transformation is to promote openness to the chance and the threat, the good and the bad, and these dual possibilities are irreducible. I have highlighted this ambivalence in a number of concepts: in the danger inhabiting all calls for hospitality, in the uncertainty of the link between deconstruction and justice, and in democracy’s autoimmunity. These are related, since the ambivalence of the relation between inheritance and justice, and that of autoimmunity, can be understood as manifestations of the fundamental duality.
of hospitality. The central point is that all attest to the detachment of inheritance and democracy from any stable conception of the good. But this being the case, why should Derrida (or anyone) value inheritance or democracy, or more precisely the inheritance in democracy that I have argued provides content to the phrase “democracy to come”? In its most basic understanding, to value something is to see it as desirable, as good in some measure. Necessarily divorced from the good, democracy to come would seem to have nothing to motivate its positive valuation.

Another way to frame this question is to contrast what is going on in Derrida’s writings on democracy, all of which take place in the last fifteen or so years of his life, with work early in his career. One of the dominant themes in Derrida’s early work is the demonstration of a fundamental ambivalence in binary valuation as opposed to the philosophical tradition’s assertion of its coherence. The difference from the later work, however, is that Derrida never at the same time places himself on the side of one term in a binary rather than another. For example, in “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida famously discusses Plato’s distribution of values in *Phaedrus*, where Socrates elevates speech as good and denigrates writing as bad. Socrates’ judgment is based on a whole system of related values privileging a number of terms, including the father, the origin, truth, life, and philosophy over their opposites the son, the copy, falsehood, death, and sophistry. Plato places speech in the first list, and writing in the second. Derrida’s deconstruction of the Platonic text does not proceed by arguing that writing is good and speech bad. Rather, he first seizes on and amplifies the fundamental ambivalence carried by “pharmakon,” a term meaning both poison and cure that Plato uses to describe writing. Underlining this ambivalence shifts the value of writing from being bad to being both good and bad. Then, showing how speech also exhibits the characteristics of the pharmakon, Derrida shows how it too shares in this ambivalence. So by the end of Derrida’s text both speech and writing are pharmaka, each governed by a generalized structure of writing. In all of this, at no time does Derrida side with the pharmakon against the Platonic Good, in the way he endorses democracy to come. At best the pharmakon is valued as having descriptive merit—it better describes what is really at work in speech and writing than does the traditional Platonic theory of the Forms.

From my analysis in the last chapter, one sees that Derrida does not make such a claim concerning democracy to come. He could have done so by arguing that democracy has the merit of highlighting an openness to the future that all political structures share, and so value it as descriptively superior. But instead Derrida goes further by choosing to promote a particular kind of inheritance of aporias, raising the stakes of their tension in an effort to open them up to greater change and transformation, and he suggests that this action is democratic. In this way Derrida implies that democracy is desirable for reasons more than mere descriptive accuracy. But can such a move be justified? What supports Derrida’s taking such a step beyond the point of neutrality with respect to this particular normative dimension? In this chapter I aim to provide
an answer to this question. I will do so by examining the opposing answers given to it that emerge out of the recent work of two commentators, Martin Hägglund and Leonard Lawlor. Through arguing that neither Hägglund’s nor Lawlor’s account is satisfactory, I will advance my own proposal for dealing with this issue, which lies in a space between these two positions.

The Challenge to Value

In *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Martin Hägglund provides a comprehensive interpretation of Derrida’s work that challenges any attempt to justify normative claims on its basis. Hägglund’s analysis is wide-ranging, examining a host of different concepts through in-depth engagements with thinkers whom Derrida reads (primarily Kant, Husserl, and Levinas) and who read him in turn (including Simon Critchley, John Caputo, and Ernesto Laclau). Since my own concerns do not coincide with the broad scope of Hägglund work, I will focus on the central theoretical structure underlying his argument and its application to the concept most relevant to my analysis, democracy to come.

Hägglund’s argument against deriving normative claims from deconstructive analysis is rooted in a distinction he draws between one set of terms I have been using, “the chance and the threat,” from another that also appears in Derrida’s writings, “the best and the worst.” Hägglund defines these terms through a reference to spacing—the fundamental structure naming the essential relation of spatial and temporal presence to alterity which I invoked in Chapters 2 and 3. Time, Hägglund asserts, is conditioned by spacing, which means that everything in time finds itself in an essential relation to alterity. Further, Hägglund argues that it is only because of this fact that anything can happen at all, since all events are constituted by the coming of something other to an entity. Without alterity, things simply remain the same, and nothing happens.

The focus of *Radical Atheism* is on life, and one of Hägglund’s core claims is that all life is mortal. Being temporal, life is conditioned by spacing, and so living necessarily entails an openness to alterity. This openness to alterity is in turn an openness to a future that is essentially unpredictable, meaning that everything that is living is open to the possibility that its life will come to an end. It is here that Hägglund inscribes the chance and the threat. The openness to alterity that constitutes mortal life can be said to offer a chance for entities—they are given the chance to survive, to live on. But at the very same time there is here a threat, namely the threat that entities will not live on, but end, since this is always one of the possibilities that may come in an open future. The chance of survival and the threat of its end are thus necessary possibilities that arise in mortal life. Or, in Hägglund’s words, “The chance is the threat since the chance is always a chance of mortal life that is intrinsically threatened by death.” For further precision, it is worth clarifying the meaning of the “is” in this claim. I would suggest that it should not be taken to refer to an identity in which these terms are asserted to be exactly the same thing. Rather, they are two different possibilities—the chance
of living on, and the threat of dying—that necessarily arise together because of their source in spacing? An alternative expression of this could thus be “the chance carries the threat” (or equally, “the threat carries the chance”).

Turning now to the other couple, “the best and the worst,” one sees a different relation. Hägglund’s definition of the worst is to be understood with reference to the previous distinction, for he states that the argument concerning the chance and the threat “presupposes that being is essentially temporal (to be = to happen) and that it is inherently valuable that something happens (the worst = that nothing happens).” Now I do not endorse the assertion here that it is inherently valuable that something happens, for, as I will argue later in this chapter, all values are contestable. Indeed, Hägglund would seem to agree with this, claiming later in the text that it is “a part of deconstructive reason to recognize that no value has an inherent value, and that any value can be used for better or for worse.” In any case, if “to be = to happen” then it is plausible to assert that to have nothing happen and so an absence of being is the worst of all possible states. The worst is thus the realization of the threat of the end carried in the structure of mortal life, where this end is understood as the cessation of an entity’s being. What then of “the best”? This refers to what is traditionally seen as the most desirable thing, namely an existence free from all threat. Such an existence is placed in “the ideal realm of eternity . . . explicitly posited as the immutable and the inviolable.” If mortal life necessarily carries the threat of the worst, then it is only beyond mortality, beyond time as spacing, that the threat could be annulled. Traditionally, therefore, the best is opposed to the worst, since it is that which keeps the worst at bay. However, Hägglund highlights Derrida’s crucial move, which is to argue that thus conceived, far from preventing it from happening, the best is identical to the worst. In an immutable eternity nothing happens, which is precisely the definition of the worst. Ending all possibility of threat, eternity simultaneously ends all possibility of chance and thus ends all possibility of life. As Hägglund writes, “The best is the worst since the best can never become better or worse and thus abolishes the chance and threat of mortal life.” In contrast to Hägglund’s similar statement on the chance and the threat cited above, here the “is” should be understood as marking an identity. Hägglund claims that for Derrida the best and the worst are exactly the same state.

One result of Hägglund’s interpretation is that the four initial terms—chance, threat, best, and worst—now reduce to three. The chance and the threat remain distinct, even as they necessarily arise together, but the best is nothing other than the worst. These definitions ground Hägglund’s diagnosis of the challenge Derrida’s work poses to the justification of normative claims. The positive ideal of the best, that which stands at the summit of what is desired, has been shown to be the most undesirable thing, the worst. This is not for merely empirical or contingent reasons, but because the supposed ideal is identical to that which it is assumed to oppose. The best thus cannot operate as an ideal toward which one ought to strive, since this would be precisely to strive for the worst. In addition, since the structure of spacing demonstrates that
every chance is necessarily accompanied by a threat, deconstructive analysis (which for Hägglund is focused on articulating the structure of spacing) cannot give any reasons for privileging certain actions over others. The chance and the threat are always co-implicated, with spacing entailing that the one never comes without the possibility of the other. Thus, against those who would appeal to openness to inscribe a normative dimension into deconstruction, Hägglund asserts:

The openness to the future is unconditional in the sense that everything (including every system and action) necessarily is open to the future, but it is not unconditional in the sense of a normative ideal. The mistake is thus to assume that one can derive a normative affirmation of the future from the unconditional “yes” to the coming of the future. . . . My argument is, on the contrary, that there is no such intrinsic normativity in deconstruction. Despite occasional inconsistencies, Derrida himself underscores that no norms or rules can be derived from the constitutive condition of undecidability. In every system there is openness to the future, but there is no guarantee that it is better to be more open rather than less open to the future.8

Thus on Hägglund’s reading, deconstruction undermines any determined normativity that might be given on its basis. The logic of deconstruction is undecidable with respect to value, and one cannot derive any particular course of action or structure from this logic.

Of direct relevance to my concerns, Hägglund carries this undecidability in value over to his reading of Derrida on democracy.

There is no given concept, constitution, or regime of democracy, which means that a commitment to “democracy” cannot be justified in itself. To look for such justification in Derrida’s work is to misunderstand the level on which his analyses operate. Derrida does not offer solutions to political problems or normative guidelines for how to approach them. On the contrary, he argues that solutions and norms cannot be justified once and for all, since they are instituted in relation to the undecidable coming of time that precedes and exceeds them.9

Although the focus of this passage is restricted to democracy, its claim is in one sense stronger than that made in the last passage that I cited. Here Hägglund asserts that Derrida demonstrates how democracy is subject to the undecidability contained in the structure of spacing, and this deprives democracy from operating as a positive ideal whose realization would bring about good results. On Hägglund’s reading, Derrida thus shows why there can be no final justification given for an endorsement of democracy, whether the logic one uses to do so is deconstructive or not. Further, Hägglund asserts that to think Derrida does offer a justification “in itself” for democracy is to “misunderstand the level on which his analyses operate.” Presumably this means that insofar as Derrida is committed to uncovering and highlighting the structure of spacing, he is not interested in the project of finding a final justification for endorsing democracy as desirable.
This is not to say, however, that Hägglund thinks there can be no justification whatsoever for democracy. Immediately following the passage just cited he lets justification back in, stating: “Far from absolving use from politics, it is the undecidable coming of time that makes politics necessary in the first place, since it precipitates the negotiation of unpredictable events. The undecidable coming of time makes it possible to justify decisions but at the same time makes it impossible for any justification to be final or sheltered from critique.” In speaking thus, Hägglund suggests that justification in the realm of politics is possible, if only ever provisionally. But it is unclear in Hägglund’s account in what such justification would consist. Further, Hägglund goes on to specify one such way in which he thinks Derrida legitimately endorses democracy, a way that presumably can be given provisional justification.

If Derrida privileges the concept of democracy, it is not because he thinks it can guarantee a good or just society but because the concept of democracy more evidently than other concepts takes into account the undecidable future. Strictly speaking, one cannot posit an absolute democracy even as a theoretical fiction. The very concept of democracy inscribes the relentless coming of other circumstances that one will have to negotiate.

Hägglund here describes Derrida’s privileging of democracy on the basis of what I called at the beginning of this chapter “descriptive merit”—democracy is to be preferred because it makes explicit the undecidability that inhabits all political concepts. It is not that democracy is more desirable as an idea with which one could order society, it is just that it does a better job of describing the alterity to which all political systems are subject. And it is worth noting that when Hägglund reiterates this claim of descriptive merit, he references the very same passage I cited in Chapter 3 to support my interpretation of the role of inheritance in democracy. This is the passage from “The Reason of the Strongest” concerning democracy’s uniqueness with respect to its “absolute and intrinsic historicity . . . the right to self-critique and perfectibility” (R, 86–87/ V, 126–27). Hägglund takes this characterization of democracy to mean that “more forcefully than any other political concept, democracy brings out the autoimmunity that is the condition for life in general . . . . The concept of democracy testifies to an ‘absolute and intrinsic historicity’ where nothing is immune from its own destructibility.” Again the claim is only that democracy does a better job of illustrating what is the case for everything, democratic or not.

Piecing all of this together, a partial view of the position of normativity in Derrida’s writings emerges. Hägglund is clear that no determinate norms or rules can be grounded in openness, since this is inherently undecidable when it comes to value. He also argues that Derrida’s work shows why any final justification for political solutions and norms is impossible, whether grounded in deconstructive thinking or not. Finally, he highlights one way in which he thinks Derrida can legitimately endorse democracy, which is based on its superiority in terms of describing the constitutive exposure to the future that underlies all political systems.
However, I describe this view as “partial” since certain questions remain unanswered. First, it is unclear in what provisional justification would consist, such that it is not similarly subject to deconstruction’s critique. Addressing this question is especially pressing since Hägglund claims that “the spacing of time is the condition not only for everything that can be cognized and experienced, but also for everything that can be thought and desired.” If this is the case, why doesn’t the undecidability entailed by spacing automatically undermine all justifications for norms that can be thought, whether final or provisional? Second, Hägglund does not discuss whether such provisional justification can legitimately occur within a deconstructive analysis. In emphasizing undecidability as the central focus of deconstruction, he would seem to imply it cannot, even if it is the case that provisional justification is possible in some other discourse. But this issue remains open in Hägglund’s account. Third, Hägglund does not state whether descriptive merit is the only justification possible for democracy. Can other justifications be given, if only ever provisionally? And combining this with the second question, can any of these justifications be considered properly a part of Derrida’s deconstructive analyses?

My interpretation gives answers to some of these questions, precisely through my focus on inheritance. On my reading, in contrast to Hägglund’s cited above, Derrida’s remarks in “The Reason of the Strongest” on democracy’s intrinsic historicity testify to the central role played by inheritance in his understanding of democracy, and it is in the relation of inheritance that I have located a normative dimension. As I argued in Chapter 2, Derrida does not inherit from others by merely describing the aporias that inhabit their work. Rather, he goes beyond description to actively amplify the tension in these aporias through the movement of surenchère, or upping the ante. This step beyond is a choice on Derrida’s part, so it is not necessary, but I have argued that it is to be properly understood as a part of his deconstructive analysis. Further, as was seen in Chapter 3, it is in this choice that Derrida’s practice of inheritance—that is to say, deconstruction—can be seen to be democratic, for it is the way that Derrida carries out the democratic injunction to self-critique. Thus, on my interpretation, deconstruction as Derrida performs it contains a normative dimension that is governed by more than an endorsement of descriptive merit, and this carries with it a particular endorsement of democracy.

The question that remains, therefore, is what legitimates this endorsement, if only ever provisionally. Why doesn’t the undecidability in democracy automatically disqualify such a move? Before addressing this question directly, I will first examine an alternative interpretation justifying the presence of normativity in Derrida’s work. This will allow me to analyze further the precise role played by particular normative terms in Derrida’s writings. I will then return to examine Hägglund’s view, in order to more fully develop and justify my own interpretation.
Against the Worst and a Lesser Violence

Across *Radical Atheism*, Hägglund uses the logic articulated above to argue against a number of influential interpretations that see an intrinsic normativity in deconstruction. In particular, he targets the Levinasian readings of Simon Critchley and Drucilla Cornell that assume Derrida’s work is oriented toward an ideal of peace, and the theological interpretation of John Caputo that aligns deconstruction with a religious passion for a God who is good. These interpretations attribute the normativity in Derrida’s work with reference to a positive ideal, against which Hägglund deploys the force of his argument equating the best and the worst. In this section I examine an alternative approach found in the secondary literature. This approach seeks to justify the presence of normativity in Derrida’s work not through an appeal to a positive ideal that one should try to approximate—it is acknowledged that the best is necessarily compromised—but through invoking a negative ideal, the worst, that one should try to avoid, by promoting a “lesser” or “least” violence. In his *This Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida*, Leonard Lawlor makes such an argument.\(^4\) As the title suggests, Lawlor’s central aim in this work is to interpret and extend Derrida’s reflections on animality, and is thus not directly concerned with democracy. However, in the course of his interpretation he articulates a general approach to questions of normativity and value in Derrida’s writings. This, together with the role that animality plays in Derrida’s political work, and the fact that many of Lawlor’s claims concerning the worst are applied more broadly in his entry on Derrida in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, makes it relevant to my concerns.\(^5\) In what follows I will thus examine the general scheme Lawlor lays out, leaving aside his specific engagement with questions of the animal.

On the face of it, Lawlor would seem to agree with the statements concerning life and the worst made by Hägglund, discussed above. He speaks, for example, of a “mortalism” in Derrida’s thinking, arguing that “death is in life.” Further, in maintaining that the worst is to be understood as the eradication of all difference, “when the other to which one is related is completely appropriated to or completely in one’s self,” Lawlor claims that “in its most paradoxical formula, the worst violence would be a violence that produced something absolutely alive and absolutely dead.”\(^6\) This is to say that pure life conceived in the absence of death is in fact identical to it, and this is associated with the violence of the worst. In this way Lawlor steers clear of any appeal to a positive ideal that can be conceived free from corruption. However, unlike Hägglund, Lawlor does not argue on this basis that deconstructive analysis is normatively undecidable. Rather he maintains that the worst violence operates in *This Is Not Sufficient* as something to be avoided, something from which Derrida counsels one should do all one can to distance oneself. How is this to be done? By embracing not an ideal pure in any traditional sense, but one that is purely impure. Summing up his view in the very last lines of the book, Lawlor writes:
What is most pure in a language, in the logos, the pharmakon, for Derrida, is the very possibility of impurity. . . . We must be corruptible in countless ways, in all the ways possible. Being infinitely corruptible limits the worst violence with the least violence: every single other is wholly other and every single other corrupts us without being rejected. Every single other is received without being captured. This least violence is what is required for our today so that there might be a tomorrow. 17

Lawlor here calls for an active amplification of impurity, linking this to “the least violence” that would act as a limitation to “the worst violence.” In This Is Not Sufficient the way one is to do this is through pursuing a strategy of openness to alterity, as seen when Lawlor issues an invitation to “try to reverse unconditional inhospitality, the worst, into unconditional hospitality.” 18 In addition, the unconditional hospitality that is here opposed to the worst is one of several terms (the others being friendship, saving, and unconditional forgiveness) which are similarly pitted against the worst through being tied to the least violence and through an association of the worst with their opposites (enmity and sacrifice). 19 Lawlor thus writes that “we can say that the least violent response is the most amiable response,” that we should “not think in terms of the enemy. . . . Friendship suspends the killing, even if this suspension is violently instituted, even if the condition of friendship and peace consists in the ability to kill or be killed,” and that the relation he advocates “is not a structure of sacrifice but a structure of saving by means of replacement.” 20

Considering all of these citations together, one sees that there are two logics at work in Lawlor’s text. At a general level, he argues that what is required is an embrace of a logic of contamination or corruptibility. But at those precise moments in which he articulates his normative stance, he relies on a logic of opposition—unconditional inhospitality is to be reversed into unconditional hospitality, one should think the friend rather than the enemy, what is needed is saving rather than sacrifice. This second logic is at odds with the first, and, I would suggest, cannot be sustained within the Derridean framework. In the terms of Hägglund’s analysis, in his normative claims Lawlor separates the chance from the threat. It is only if the least violence is free from all threat of the worst that it could be said to limit the worst violence. Similarly, it is only if unconditional hospitality carries a chance and not a threat that it could be the reverse of unconditional inhospitality or the worst. However, as I argued in Chapter 1 and as Lawlor seems also to acknowledge, unconditional hospitality, for example, cannot be thus conceived. It carries both the chance and the threat—it welcomes friend and foe—and this cannot be avoided. As a consequence, the ground for distinguishing these terms from their opposites (which is the ground of Lawlor’s normative schema) falls away. 21

Now I should note that Lawlor himself is cautious when describing the force of his normative claims. For example, one of the statements cited above is immediately qualified, with the full passage reading as follows: “Let us try to reverse unconditional inhospitality, the worst, into unconditional hospitality. Unconditional hospitality is
not the best but only the less bad. Indeed, it is a kind of mirror image of the worst. By being vulnerable in the way I have described, there is no guarantee that the worst will be avoided. The recipe describes a dangerous experiment; prudence is required.” Further, Lawlor continues by arguing that the terms he uses fall short of being values. “Yet hospitality and equality here do not really function as values; they are instead what I would call ‘prevalues,’ valuationally indeterminate.” But these qualifications serve only to confuse Lawlor’s claims, for if they are “valuationally indeterminate,” how can terms like hospitality and equality do any work at all in Lawlor’s articulation of a recipe for desired action? In addition, to describe unconditional hospitality as only “less bad” than the worst is to say that it is not its “mirror image,” which could be achieved through a reversal. And if it is only less bad, then it falls short of being the least violent. Not all of these statements can be true together.

This confusion in Lawlor’s text can be traced to ambiguities at both ends of the value scale to which he appeals, the negative and the positive, which can in turn be seen to rest on ambiguities in Derrida’s writings themselves. At the negative end, Lawlor in fact relies on two competing definitions of the worst, claiming that it is both the actual eradication of all difference and a tendency in this direction. He thus writes, on the one hand:

The worst violence occurs—we have to wonder here if the worst is really possible or is it the impossible itself—when the other to which one is related is completely appropriated to or completely in one’s self, when an address reaches its proper destination, when it reaches only its proper destination. Reaching only its proper destination, the address will exclude more, many more, and that “many more,” at the limit, amounts to all. It is this complete exclusion or this extermination of the most—there is no limit to this violence—that makes this violence the worst violence. The worst is a relation that makes of more than one simply one, that makes, out of a division, an indivisible sovereignty. The worst is not the opposite of Leibniz’s best possible world; it is the end of the world, no world, no future, total apocalypse.

Leaving aside the question of its possibility for a moment, Lawlor here defines the worst as the state of absolute unity, where all difference disappears. The worst is thus located at the extreme end of any violence or action one might imagine, to the point where the world as such ends.

On the other hand, throughout his text Lawlor identifies the worst with a number of phenomena that fall short of this extreme state of apocalypse, even if many would agree that they are undesirable. One thus reads that “the idea of rights in general does not avoid the worst,” that “the worst is, as Deleuze and Guattari say in A Thousand Plateaus, ‘the suicidal state,’ ‘realized nihilism,’ in a word, fascism,” that “Heidegger’s strategy results in the worst . . . it ends up sanctioning Nazism, or, more generally, racism,” that the worst violence “consists in the attempt to eliminate the evil of the pharmakon once and for all,” that “this tendency defines the worst, a tendency toward the complete appropriation of all others,” and that the risks of “biological continuism and
metaphysical separation . . . amount to the worst.”24 In all of these cases the worst is identified with positions that are seen to attempt to eradicate all difference, without actually achieving this goal. One may well claim that fascism, racism, and Nazism all seek to totalize and so aim for the worst (and perhaps even the ideas of rights, biological continuism, and metaphysical separation, although here I would hesitate), but none ever finally realizes this absolute state. At these moments Lawlor thus confuses the threat of the worst with the worst itself.25 And the threat of the worst alone is not enough to establish the distinctions required, for reasons internal to his interpretation. Insofar as Lawlor maintains that the threat of the worst inhabits all positions, being a necessary possibility that always accompanies any chance, one cannot justify opposition to certain positions simply on this basis. The threat of the worst arises everywhere. These positions must be opposed, if one wishes to oppose them, for other reasons.

Acknowledging this would nonetheless seem to leave the worst intact as something to be avoided, remaining an anchor for normative injunctions. The mere threat of the worst might not be reason to avoid some positions over others, but one could still insist on avoiding the worst itself. However, here Lawlor’s question of whether the worst is in fact possible becomes relevant. Is the complete eradication of all difference, the absolute end to alterity that defines the worst in Derridean thinking, an actual possibility? To answer this, I will examine what Derrida says about the worst, focusing on four of its “appearances” in his texts. I place “appearances” in scare quotes, for the worst is named as such in only two of the four texts that I discuss. But in all four cases Derrida describes a structure that conforms to what both Hägglund and Lawlor have labeled the worst, namely the complete eradication of the trace structure, without remainder. This will be somewhat of a detour from my interrogation of Lawlor’s arguments, but one important in order to comprehend just what is at stake in the invocation of the worst in his interpretation of Derrida’s work.

The first text to consider is Derrida’s 1984 essay “No Apocalypse, Not Now: Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives.”26 Speaking of the possibility of total nuclear war, Derrida states the following:

Now, what the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness gives us to think, even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive and therefore of the basis of literature and criticism. Not necessarily the destruction of humanity, of the human habitat, or even of other discourses (arts and sciences), or even indeed of poetry or the epic; these latter might reconstitute their living process and their archive, at least to the extent that the structure of this archive (that of a nonliterary memory) structurally implies reference to a real referent external to the archive itself.27

Derrida claims just before this passage that the singularity of literature is found in its essential constitution in a link to an objective archive. This distinguishes it from the
other discourses mentioned, which can be conceived as having references other than their own material support alone. Science, for example, refers to objects in the world beyond its own record, and so as long as these objects exist, so does the possibility of its return after the eradication of this record. Now I am not so concerned with the particulars of this distinction—Derrida himself admits that what he has provisionally distinguished from literature (such as science) may in fact not have a reference beyond its own archive, and so to that extent could be said to “participate in literature.” What is important is that in this discussion he speaks of an event of “total and remainderless destruction of the archive,” “the absolute effacement of any possible trace.”

Understood in these terms, the worst would be the erasure of any future, achieved through the total eradication of any past archive that is in principle open to recall through the persistence of a trace. In other words, in being a destruction of the past that annuls the future, the worst would be the destruction of all possibility of inheritance. It is for this reason that Derrida argues that total nuclear war “would be waged in the name of something whose name, in this logic of total destruction, could no longer be borne, transmitted, inherited by anything living.”

It is also worth noting that in this context Derrida contrasts such absolute destruction, on the one hand, with the death of any single individual, on the other.

An individual death, a destruction affecting only a part of society, tradition, or culture can always give rise to a symbolic work of mourning, with memory, compensation, internalization, idealization, displacement, and so on. In that case there is monumentalization, archivization and work on the remainder, work of the remainder. Similarly, my own death, so to speak, as an individual can always be anticipated phantasmatically, symbolically too, as a negativity at work—a dialectic of the work, of signature, name, heritage. Images, grief, all the resources of memory and tradition, can cushion the reality of that death, whose anticipation remains therefore interwoven with fictionality, symbolicity, or, if you prefer, literature; and this is so even if I live this anticipation in anguish, terror, despair, as a catastrophe that I have no reason not to equate with the annihilation of humanity as a whole. . . . The only absolutely real referent is thus of the scope of an absolute nuclear catastrophe that would irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity, the very survival, as I call it, at the heart of life.

This passage claims that the death of an individual is different from the worst, for in the former a trace lives on, supported in the memories of those left behind, and in the external memory that is the material archive of that person’s life. And Derrida maintains that this is the case even if it is not experienced by the individual in this way. The worst, by contrast, requires the absolute destruction of all such support, of all that surrounds life enabling it to live on.

One consequence of this qualification is that the description that one finds in Derrida’s late work of each person’s death as “the end of the world” should not be taken as a description of the worst. Such an end to the world is not the eradication of every trace, but rather a description of the structure of interruption that constitutes the very
trace structure of survival itself. I mention this because both Lawlor and Hägglund seem to ignore this distinction. Lawlor does not address it explicitly, but he could be read to suggest it in a passage cited above when he claims that “the worst is not the opposite of Leibniz’s best possible world; it is the end of the world, no world, no future, total apocalypse.” Hägglund is more direct, for in discussing these passages from “No Apocalypse,” he writes that “the hypothesis of a total nuclear holocaust reinforces the radical finitude that deconstruction articulates as the condition for life in general. As a finite being I am always living in relation to the threat of absolute destruction, since with my death the entire world that opens through me and that lives in me will be extinguished.” I will have more to say about Derrida’s description of individual death as “the end of the world” in Chapter 6. For now, I wish simply to note that, contrary to what Lawlor and Hägglund suggest, it should not be understood as a synonym for the worst. These name different structures.

Moving on, Derrida reiterates this distinction between individual death and the worst, and develops his thinking of the worst further, a few years later in “Force of Law.” At the very end of this essay Derrida speaks of “the possible complicity among these [Heideggerian and Benjaminian] discourses and the worst (here the ‘final solution’)” (FOL, 298/FDL, 146). More thus can be learned by examining the discussion of the final solution that appears just a couple of pages earlier.

One must try to think [the final solution] starting from the possibility of singularity, the singularity of the signature and of the name, because what the order of representation tried to exterminate was not only human lives by the millions—natural lives—but also a demand for justice, and also names: and first of all the possibility of giving, inscribing, calling, and recalling the name. Not only because there was a destruction or project of destruction of the name and the very memory of the name, of the name as memory, but also because the system of mythical violence . . . went all the way to its own limit, in a demonic fashion, on the two sides of the limit: at the same time, it kept the archive of its destruction, produced a simulacra of justificatory arguments, with a terrifying legal, bureaucratic, statist objectivity and (at the same time, therefore) it produced a system in which its logic, the logic of objectivity, made possible the invalidation and therefore effacement of testimony and responsibilities, the neutralization of the singularity of the final solution. (FOL, 296/FDL, 141–42)

Echoing the claims of “No Apocalypse,” Derrida here argues that the worst goes beyond the extermination of human lives, even by the millions. Rather, what is decisive in the attribution of this description is the attempt to eradicate the trace structure of the name, preventing its giving, inscription, calling, and recollection—in other words, destroying everything that would enable a certain kind of living on through inheritance. But its means of doing so differs from the sheer or purely destructive force of a total nuclear war. The latter would simply and directly eradicate all material support that could ever carry a trace. By contrast, Derrida describes in “Force of Law” the eradication of one archive by means of the construction of another. The meticulous documenting of the process of erasure perversely serves to realize this process itself, for it replaces the traces left by
those murdered with an alternative account. It is the erection of a memory that serves to radically forget, and in this way puts an end to all inheriting.

In “No Apocalypse” and “Force of Law” the worst is thus associated with two particular threats, of total nuclear war and of the final solution. However, in the third text from which I wish to cite, 1994’s *Archive Fever*, the worst is taken far outside the confines of these two events, with the destruction via construction diagnosed in “Force of Law” seen to be a process at work in every archive. As with ”No Apocalypse,” here Derrida does not literally name the worst, speaking instead of the death drive, but what he describes mirrors its structure.

[The death drive] is at work, but since it always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own. It destroys in advance its own archive, as if that were in truth the very motivation of its most proper movement. . . .

. . . There would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression. Above all, and this is the most serious, beyond or within this simple limit called finiteness or finitude, there is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, this aggression and destruction drive. This threat is *in-finite*, it sweeps away the logic of finitude and the simple factual limits, the transcendental aesthetics, one might say, the spatio-temporal conditions of conservation.

In contrast to the analyses of total nuclear war and the final solution, where the worst is presented as something caused by a force external to an archive, here Derrida describes a force of destruction at work within all archives. This force is the condition of possibility of there being a movement toward archiving in the first place, and so the “archive fever” is irreducibly dual, a desire for the archive that at the same time burns. Every archive, Derrida argues, contains both the chance of the archive’s conservation and the threat of its absolute demise, at once.

This understanding of the worst is transferred to Derrida’s discussion of the event in the fourth text I will mention, the second essay of *Rogues*, “The ‘World’ of the Enlightenment to Come,” first delivered as a talk in 2002.

For as soon as reason does not close itself off from the event that comes, the event of what or who comes, assuming it is not irrational to think that the worst can always happen, and well beyond what Kant thinks under the name “radical evil,” then only the infinite possibility of the worst and of perjury can grant the possibility of the Good, of veracity and of sworn faith. This possibility remains infinite but as the very possibility of an autoimmune finitude. (*R*, 153/*V*, 211)

Derrida again describes the worst as a necessary, internal possibility, this time inhabiting autoimmune finitude, which in this text is coextensive with finitude itself.

The worst has thus moved, in this brief genealogy spanning two decades, from specific, external possibilities of the absolute destruction of the trace structure in the ideas
of total nuclear war and the final solution to a necessary possibility of all finite entities conditioned by the structure of the trace, which for Derrida are all finite entities as such. Returning thus to the question with which I began, that of the worst’s possibility, the answer would thus seem affirmative. Derrida explicitly claims it to be a possibility of finitude. However, I question whether Derrida is right to claim this, for beyond simply asserting it, he gives us no reason to think that the worst is indeed an internal possibility of all finite entities. To repeat, at issue is not the exposure to individual destruction that is a characteristic of every finite entity. For Derrida this is a necessary characteristic, as it follows from the necessity of the exposure to alterity that finitude entails. To be finite is to be open to an outside that is both good and bad, to that which can sustain existence as well as that which can destroy it. But in the event of this kind of destruction, a trace will always remain. Rather, what the worst names is the total eradication of all traces of an entity, without remainder. The strict elimination of every kind of living on. Could such an event take place? Is the complete and utter eradication of the trace possible? The complete eradication of all material support for an archive? Physical and mental, understood in the widest possible sense? The fictive example of total nuclear war comes closest to describing such a situation. But even here, assuming that this fiction is possible, one can question whether, say, the eradication of the entirety of humanity would leave no trace of the human past behind. One might still ask whether such a trace might be left “to the dead, to animals, to trees and rocks,” as Derrida asks of democracy (R, 54/V, 82). And in the case of the final solution, it would seem that what did actually occur was not the worst in the Derridean sense. The complete replacement of the archive failed to take hold, and traces of those millions murdered continue to survive. Further, one could question whether the goal of the final solution, as an ideal, coincides with the Derridean worst, for how could traces of the destruction of the entirety of Jewish culture fail to remain in the very minds of their murderers? Even in their unconscious? Of course, much here hangs on the coherence and unity of notions such as “Jewish culture,” in its entirety, but this is what the worst seems to presuppose.36

In suggesting that the final solution is not the worst, I am not claiming it is not as bad as one might have thought. Similarly with total nuclear war (which, bad as it is, feels to me to be less worse than the final solution). Rather, I am claiming that there are worse things than the worst. In other words, in the end “the worst” fails to function as a comparative term at all. Despite carrying a comparison (the “worse”) in its name, it is unclear by what measure it could be compared to anything else. Its extremity is thus better understood as marking a point of absolute difference. What it names—the total eradication of the future through the complete destruction of the archive that would produce a trace—is an event altogether different from all others, from finite events that leave a trace. Events within finite limits can perhaps be judged good or bad, better or worse, although as I will argue shortly, just how we are to do this within a Derridean perspective is far from clear. But the end of finitude itself seems beyond any such scale, beyond good and evil altogether.
Now, everything I have said up to this point does not necessarily mean that the worst is not possible. This is because even if it should not be identified with total nuclear war or the final solution, the total eradication of the trace, without remainder, remains thinkable. But within the Derridean framework there is a difference between what is thinkable and what is possible. I propose that what is being thought under the sign of the worst would be described as an “im-possibility,” in Derrida’s sense. This would mean that the worst is not something governed by a notion of capability, by an “I can,” or able to be brought about by a subject through her actions. An explication of im-possibility is found in “The Reason of the Strongest.” Distinguishing democracy to come from a Kantian ideal, Derrida claims that the latter “remains in the order of the possible . . . of what is virtual or potential, of what is within the power of someone, some ‘I can,’ to reach.” To this he opposes “the im-possible, of what must remain (in a nonnegative fashion) foreign to the order of my possibilities, to the order of the ‘I can.’ . . . It is a question here, as with the coming of any event worthy of this name, or an unforeseeable coming of the other, of a heteronomy” (R, 83–84/V, 122–23). These words are equally applicable to the worst.37 One cannot, through one’s actions, eradicate the trace altogether, put an end to repetition, or arrest the play of difference. There is always a trace, repetition, and difference. Which is not to say that the worst cannot happen. Perhaps it can. But if it happens, it could only come from elsewhere, happening to subjects from an unforeseeable other. At work here is thus a structure akin to what I described in Chapter 2 when confronting the question of whether a legacy can be put to death. There, against Derrida’s suggestion to the contrary, I argued that an inheritance cannot be erased once and for all through one’s actions. All attempts to kill an inheritance produce a trace as their necessary consequence, remains that live on. The same argument would here apply.

Returning now to This Is Not Sufficient, recall my claim that Lawlor relies on two competing definitions of the worst in his analysis—the actual eradication of all difference, and the tendency toward realizing such a thing. I argued that the latter is not enough to ground Lawlor’s normative claims, for insofar as this threat of the worst is a feature of all positions that one might take, it fails to distinguish those he favors from those he opposes. One can now see that the first definition is also inadequate to ground a normative position, for given that the worst is not possible, in the sense of being the possible outcome of the actions of a sovereign I, then it has no role to play in an account of how one should act. There is nothing to be done to avoid the worst—it will happen, if it happens, due to forces beyond a subject’s control. Arresting Lawlor’s slide between the worst and its threat by choosing one or the other will thus fail to provide the force needed to motivate a normative stance. Neither the worst nor its threat can be used as a negative ideal, the avoidance of which should guide our actions. This may indeed explain why Lawlor oscillates between the two—appeals to the threat of the worst would be an implicit acknowledgment of its im-possibility, while appeals to the worst itself may seek to make up for the weakness of the mere threat. But this oscillation cannot cover up the lack of normative force in the worst or its threat.38
Now as I stated above, “the worst” is not the only notion at work in Lawlor’s scheme. There is the other, more positive end of the scale, namely the “least violence” that he argues limits the worst. The next question to ask is therefore whether this can do the job required. Can the “least violence” provide a ground for claims of what one ought to do? Again the answer is no, for here too there is a related confusion. Consider the following set of statements from This Is Not Sufficient:

What is required, here and now, in the age of so-called globalization, is a lesser violence, “violence against violence”: as Derrida says as early as “Violence and Metaphysics,” “the least possible violence.” . . .

. . . Derrida claims, in Of Spirit, that it is urgent to find the least bad (less worse) form of complicity with the biologicist and the metaphysical risks. The new logic of the limit is supposed to be a response to this urgency of the least bad or the less worse. . . .

. . . What we are seeking here is a lesser violence, even the least violence.

In each case Lawlor attempts to articulate that which should be sought in resistance to the worst, and in doing so equivocates between the “lesser” (or “less”), on the one hand, and the “least,” on the other. There is, however, a marked difference between the two. A lesser violence names all of the positions on Lawlor’s scale of values that fall short of the worst, while the least violence names the extreme position that would be opposite to the worst. Just as with the worst and its threat, I would suggest that here too neither term taken individually will do the work that Lawlor needs. Consider first “the least violence,” which plays the dominant role in Lawlor’s argument. Against its use one can make an argument similar to, indeed stronger than the one I advanced above concerning the possibility of the worst. Not only does “the least violent” name a strictly impossible position—any position labeled “least” in an absolute sense is subject to further division, producing another that is just a little less violent—I would maintain that it does not belong in the Derridean lexicon at all. This might be a surprising claim, since the phrases “the least violence” and “the least possible violence” come from Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics,” as Lawlor signals in one of the citations above. But the first is found only in the English version of this text, being a translation of “la moindre violence,” a phrase translated in its other appearance in the same essay as “the lesser violence.” I propose that the “the lesser violence” is the appropriate translation of “la moindre violence” in both cases. To see this, consider the original contexts of Derrida’s use of this phrase. “La moindre violence” first appears in “Violence and Metaphysics” in a footnote to a description of Levinas’s ambivalent view of technology.

Levinas never simply condemns technology. It can rescue from a worse violence [une violence pire], the “reactionary” violence of sacred ravishment, of taking root, of the natural proximity of landscape. “Technology takes us out of the Heideggerian world and the superstitions of Place.” It offers the chance “to let the human face
shine in its nudity” [Difficult Freedom]. We will return to this. Here, we only wish to foreshadow that within history—but is it meaningful elsewhere?—every philosophy of non-violence can only choose the lesser violence [la moindre violence] within an economy of violence.40

Derrida claims that while he is opposed to technology in some respects, Levinas also recognizes that it can be mobilized against communal and nationalistic tendencies. Both technology and these latter tendencies are violent, and Levinas supports the former in this context as the less violent of two options. In question is a comparative judgment of degree within a system in which violence is inevitable, and so translating “la moindre violence” as “the lesser violence” is appropriate.

Later in the essay, when Derrida articulates more fully the kind of strategic engagement with violence that he argues is necessary, “la moindre violence” reappears.

If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence [la pire violence], that of silence and the night preceding or repressing discourse. This vigilance is a violence chosen as the least violence [la moindre violence] by a philosophy which takes history, that is finitude, seriously; a philosophy which knows itself as historical in each of its aspects (in a sense which tolerates neither finite totality, nor positive infinity), and knows itself, as Levinas says in another sense, as economy. . . . The philosopher (man) must speak and write within this war of light, a war in which he always already knows himself to be engaged; a war which he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, by risking the worst violence.41

In contrast to the last citation, in this passage Alan Bass translates “la moindre violence” as “the least violence.” One can understand his reason for doing so, since here there is an implicit contrast drawn between “la moindre violence” and “la pire violence,” (translated as “the worst violence”), while in the earlier passage “la moindre violence” (“the lesser violence”) was opposed to “une violence pire” (“a worse violence”). I would argue, however, that in this second passage “la moindre violence” is also better translated as “the lesser violence,” for two reasons. First, again at issue is a comparative judgment between two positions, one that is outside of or opposed to discourse, and another affirming discourse, taking finitude seriously. Derrida labels the former “the worst violence,” and so the choice made here is one of a lesser violence in comparison to it. Second, it is hard to make any sense of the phrase “the least violence,” understood not as a synonym for “the lesser violence,” but as marking some absolute, noncomparative position. If it is a question of a scale of measurement that stretched from the most violent to the least, then the only position properly labeled “least” would be that of pure nonviolence, of peace. For, as I claimed above, any position labeled “least” and still “violent” would be exposed to further division, in which less violence could be imagined. The possibility of peace, however, is ruled out in Derrida’s interpretation in this essay—it is one of the precise points on which he opposes Levinas, arguing that there is always an “economy of violence,” and so no pure peace.42
Thus it would be better to remove “the least violence” from the translation “Violence and Metaphysics,” since it implies an absoluteness that is out of place in Derrida's thinking. This is not to say that the third phrase from this essay mentioned above, “the least possible violence,” should be altered, since the original “la moindre violence possible” would admit only this translation. But here too it is a question of a comparative judgment of the violence of a “secondary war” that would “make war upon the war” that is the worst violence. This secondary war is less violent than that of the worst, but not the “least” in any absolute sense.43

As a result, the only term available for use in “Violence and Metaphysics” is “the lesser violence.” This, then, raises the question of whether the lesser violence can do the work Lawlor requires, with the added bonus of its having the legitimacy of Derrida’s own recourse to the term. But here again the answer is no. To see why, it is first worth noting that, as far as I am aware, apart from its appearance in “Violence and Metaphysics” the phrase “the lesser violence” is not found anywhere else in Derrida’s writings. Considering the constancy with which Derrida engaged the theme of violence across more than forty years of publishing, this omission is striking. Derrida is deeply concerned about violence and clearly desires its reduction in the world. Why, then, does he never again speak of the lesser violence? I would suggest that it is because this notion too is inconsistent with his views. This can be seen by examining the above citations from “Violence and Metaphysics.” In the second, more developed passage, there are three distinctions at work. The first two go together, consisting of the couples discourse/silence and light/night. Derrida contrasts the worst violence, associated with silence and the night, with the lesser violence, on the side of discourse and light. A philosophy that chooses to stay inside language is thus choosing the lesser violence. But one might well wonder just what could it mean to make such a “choice.” For if there is one thing Derrida’s writings teach, reiterated above in my discussion of the worst, it is that one cannot actually inhabit a place completely beyond language. As I have stressed, in the Derridean framework one can never fully choose to leave the economy; one is always implicated in the structures of language, difference, the trace, and iterability. This is one of the dominant themes of “Violence and Metaphysics,” and Derrida states on the same page as this citation that silence itself cannot be thought as wholly outside of language. Silence is only ever provisional, remaining a part of discourse, for it is “the strange vocation of a language called outside of itself by itself.” This vocation is “strange” because silence cannot be said to lie wholly within language, but neither is it wholly outside. So regarding the choice for the lesser violence, when tied to the couples discourse/silence and light/night, there is in fact no choice here to be made.

The only choice that could be meaningful is that signaled in the third distinction drawn in this passage, suggested in Derrida’s talk of “a philosophy which takes history, that is finitude, seriously; a philosophy which knows itself as historical . . . [and] as economy.” In raising the possibility of such a philosophy, Derrida implies that there are other philosophies, ones that would not take finitude seriously and exhibit this kind
of self-knowledge. This distinction also receives further support in the first citation from “Violence and Metaphysics” speaking of a lesser violence, where it is a question of choosing between the violence of technology and “the ‘reactionary’ violence of sacred ravishment, of taking root, of the natural proximity of landscape.”45 Levinas chooses technology over the sacred, thus acknowledging the necessity of finitude (since technology is placed firmly within the sphere of the finite) against positions that would presumably be ignorant of this necessity (insofar as the sacred aims for the infinite). Unlike the first two distinctions, at stake here is not a choice between the economy and its outside, since both options lie within the economy. Rather, it is a question of knowing this is the case, as opposed to believing that one’s finitude can be overcome. Derrida’s claim is that the choice of self-knowledge is the choice for the lesser violence.

The distinction between knowledge and ignorance is thus a choice that can be made, and so it provides substantial content to the idea of choosing a lesser violence. But the question is whether the connection Derrida makes between self-knowledge and a lesser violence is in fact correct. Will being aware of one’s finitude, and accepting the necessity of the economy of violence, result in the lesser violence? Does knowledge here make a difference in the amount of violence produced? Here the Derridean logic co-implicating the chance and the threat rears its head. Knowledge of one’s finitude is precisely knowledge that the chance always carries the threat, and there is nothing in this knowledge that enables the threat to be diminished. This kind of knowledge will not make a difference. Thus, the choice of a philosophy that takes finitude seriously, that knows itself to be historical and as lying within an economy, is not a choice for a lesser violence. It is perhaps for this reason that along with that of a lesser violence, the talk of self-knowledge also disappears from Derrida’s writings. Never again does he counsel such a strategy in his many writings on violence. My claim is that Derrida is right to leave this vocabulary behind.

Returning once again to This Is Not Sufficient, I would thus maintain that talk of the “lesser violence” is out of place in the Derridean framework, and so again fails to do the work required. A lesser violence may be preferable to the worst, but it also coincides with those positions that Lawlor claims tend toward the worst (fascism, biological continuism, and so on). Insofar as these positions fail to fully realize the worst, they themselves are rightly named “less violent” and so cannot be opposed to “a lesser violence.” Now one might think one can accept this, and then argue that it is precisely why a lesser violence is sought—a violence less than the violence performed by these positions that explicitly attempt to realize the worst. But here again the difficulty arises of how to distinguish between these different positions. In emphasizing an essential nonknowledge of the future, in which the chance and the threat are necessary co-possibilities, the Derridean framework calls into question all such judgments. Who is to say that taking certain actions will have less violent results than others? The chance and the threat are at work in all, and one is given no way of determining that any individual position will carry a greater threat than another.46
Language Remains

My critique of Lawlor might reinforce the suspicion that Derrida cannot make legitimate normative claims after all, for deprived of normative force are the positive ideals of the best, the lesser violence and the least violent, and the negative ideal of the worst. I have argued that none of these terms can do the work they are sometimes asked to do in grounding norms or rules in a deconstructive analysis. Does this therefore mean that the norms endorsed in Derridean inheritance must remain altogether unjustified? Would Derrida’s work be improved if such norms were removed? More specifically, relating to the focus of this book, would Derrida’s work on democracy be more philosophically robust if he had refrained from endorsing democracy to come? I think the answer to these questions is “No,” and the task of the final section of this chapter is to show this to be true. I do so by beginning with a return to Hägglund’s interpretation.

As I discussed earlier, Hägglund does acknowledge some legitimacy to Derrida’s endorsement of democracy, claiming that it is based on what I have termed the concept’s descriptive merit. Democracy can be endorsed because it testifies to an exposure to the future that applies to all political regimes. However, reflecting on this further, it seems clear that such a claim has little use for justifying one’s support for democracy. Indeed, promoting this claim seems only to eliminate a reason for choosing democracy, namely its openness to the future, since this is precisely what is claimed of all of its rivals. It is perhaps for this reason that among all the things historically and today to which democrats appeal in order to win support for their position, one will have a hard time finding democracy’s superiority as a concept in describing the necessity of openness. It is simply too weak a characteristic to motivate a desire for democracy; it fails to give a reason for choosing democracy over anything else.

It is thus not altogether surprising that when Hägglund himself speaks of the desire for democracy, in the course of his critique of the desire for fullness presupposed by Ernesto Laclau, he says nothing concerning this desire’s content. Apart from its not being as Laclau conceives it, all Hägglund states is that it presupposes survival: “To desire democracy cannot be to desire an ideal fullness, since even the ideal state of democracy is temporal and alterable. The desire for democracy presupposes that we are not driven toward an ideal fullness but toward living on as finite beings.”47 As with the characteristic of openness, this also fails to distinguish democracy from any other political regime, since Hägglund maintains that the affirmation of survival is presupposed by every desire, without exception. Thus, nothing in Hägglund’s account explains why one would desire democracy in the first place.

The challenge, therefore, is to articulate just how it is that a meaningful endorsement of democracy can be legitimately expressed in Derrida’s writings, if only ever provisionally, without going so far as to arrive at a position like Lawlor’s which relies on oppositional structures that these writings undermine. I have already argued that this occurs in Derrida’s practice of inheritance, in his choice to up the ante on the
aporias he receives. My task now is to give further precision as to what facilitates this choice and what allows me to claim that it is properly a part of deconstructive analysis. As a first step in doing so, consider the following remarks from “The Reason of the Strongest.” Reflecting on “the obscure status or mode” of the words “democracy to come,” Derrida writes:

“Democracy to come” can hesitate [hésiter] endlessly, oscillate indecidably and forever, between two possibilities: it can, on the one hand, correspond to the neutral, constative analysis of a concept. . . . This would amount to saying: if you want to know what you are saying when you use this inherited word democracy, you need to know that these things are inscribed or prescribed within it; for my part, I am simply describing this prescription in a neutral fashion. . . . But, on the other hand, no longer satisfied to remain at the level of neutral, constative conceptual analysis, “democracy to come” can also inscribe a performative and attempt to win conviction by suggesting support or adherence, an “and yet it is necessary to believe it,” “I believe in it, I promise, I am in on the promise and in messianic waiting, I am taking action or am at least enduring, now you do the same,” and so on. The to of the “to come” wavers [hésite] between the imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient perhaps of messianicity (nonperformative exposure to what comes, to what can always not come or has already come). (R, 91/V, 132)

One must be careful in interpreting this passage, for evoked are two different, albeit linked relations. The first involves the relation between two possibilities of the way one might understand Derrida’s talk of democracy to come. On the one hand, there is the interpretation that in his discussions of democracy, Derrida is giving a neutral description of what is entailed by the concept “democracy to come,” providing a purely constative analysis. On the other hand, there is a second possibility suggesting that when Derrida says “democracy to come” he may well be endorsing it, through the emergence of a performative force that places him on the side of democracy. He would no longer simply be offering neutral diagnoses of the operation of democracy, but supporting it and calling for others to do the same. Crucially, Derrida does not argue that one of these interpretative possibilities is correct and the other mistaken. He claims that both are inscribed in a further possibility, that of the endless, indecidable oscillation that would move between them. Derrida’s point is that this oscillation cannot be arrested, such that only one of these possibilities prevails over the other.

However, there is a second relation in this passage different from the first. This relation is described in the last sentence, holding between “the imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient perhaps of messianicity (nonperformative exposure to what comes, to what can always not come or has already come).” The focus now is not on “democracy to come” but more precisely on the “to” embedded in this phrase, and Derrida’s claim is that while here it is again a question of the performative, this time it is related to nonperformative exposure. This is different from constative analysis. Thus, while Derrida uses the same word (hésiter—translated as “hesitate” in one case and as “wavers” in the other) each time to describe the relation in question, in
each case it is a question of a different relation—performative to constative in one, and performative to nonperformative exposure in the other.

The relevant distinction for my present concern is primarily the first, for it is precisely the relation between Derrida’s constative analysis of democracy to come and his performative commitment to the notion that I am seeking to explain. What then is this relation? How should one understand Derrida’s claim that “Democracy to come’ can hesitate endlessly, oscillate indecidably and forever” between constative analysis and performative commitment? My proposal is that the coemergence of the constative and performative can be traced to the fact that deconstruction in Derrida’s texts necessarily takes place in and through language. Language remains. And it remains not as a neutral medium, but as one that comes already differentially infused with contours of value, formed from the particular sedimented history that precedes it. This terrain exerts forces structuring processes of evaluation, forces never fully determining, but that resist or encourage different paths in the evaluative choices one makes. Thus when Derrida speaks of democracy, he never does so from scratch. My first three chapters have emphasized this with respect to the descriptive dimension of Derrida’s work. In arguing that his engagement with democracy is necessarily tied to a practice of inheritance, I have demonstrated how this engagement involves a process of sorting between the many different ways democracy has been understood in the past, a wide range of meanings, from the rule of the poor to the protection of human rights, meanings whose only commonality is their shared history of being grouped under the same name. Derrida privileges some and downplays others, and the success of his proposed description—whether, for example, an understanding of democracy as engaged in self-critique through inheritance comes to be more widely accepted—will emerge out of the interplay between the force of his work and the forces differentially distributed through the preexisting terrain of meaning, along with any additional forces his present and future audience will bring to the encounter.

My point here is that a similar phenomenon occurs in terms of value. The term “democracy” has been valued differently at different moments in its history, which any discussion of the term necessarily engages. Thus, the very act of picking out this term for attention, among the many others also describing political structures or having political resonance, brings Derrida’s deconstructive writings into relation with this history of value, and with its present distribution. Put simply, in choosing to speak of “democracy to come”—rather than “republic to come,” “community to come,” “fraternity to come,” “classless society to come,” or even “fascism to come,” structures that would all resemble democracy to come at the fundamental level of spacing—Derrida unleashes a configuration of values shaped by a particular history. At present there is widely shared support of the discourse of democracy, since its positive value today is relatively stable, despite the many different interpretations of its meaning around the world. This being the case, Derrida may very well find himself placed on the side of democracy. Now he could attempt to resist this, and come out forcefully against
democracy. One could thus imagine him arguing, on the basis of the many negative characteristics of democracy underlined in “The Reason of the Strongest,” that a positive view is mistaken. This would be difficult, precisely because democracy is so highly valued, and so such a position against democracy is likely to meet strong resistance. But it is not an impossible task, especially given the resources contained in a history of political thinking dominated by antidemocratic views. Of course, Derrida did not choose this path, but note that even if he did he would have already moved well beyond providing a simply constative analysis of what is implied in democracy’s concept.

Thus Derrida cannot avoid the performative dimension of evaluation in his deconstructive analyses, since the language with which he must necessarily engage is already infused with value in a sedimented history. As sedimented, this history is a multiplicity always involving contours of relative stability and instability. And importantly, these contours will rarely be equally shaped, providing an explanation for the phenomenon of provisional justification. Such justification will depend in a large part on the degree of inherited stability. This can be amplified or diminished in the way the heir takes this inheritance up, and it can always be overturned by an oppositional force in its reception. But this is just to say that any justification would be provisional, not final, not that justification is impossible. And my interpretation also allows for the possibility that a text may be normatively neutral, since it can engage language that has little resonance in a normative register. This explains how Derrida could avoid embracing writing over speech in his early work, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, since at the time of his writing these terms were not widely seen to embody particular values. But when it comes to a language that does carry such resonance, as with the political and ethical vocabulary Derrida analyzed most in his later work, and in particular the language of democracy, then normativity in his texts will unavoidably arise. For here even if Derrida completely withheld all value judgments, he would leave unchecked the values already at work in the language used.

My interpretation therefore provides a way of understanding the link between the constative and the performative dimensions in Derrida’s deconstructive discourse on democracy and so demonstrates the necessity that normative claims be contained within this discourse. And I would suggest that it is not reducible to the framework that Hägglund proposes. The strength of Radical Atheism lies in its articulation of a fundamental logic that functions across Derrida’s writings. But this carries with it a certain weakness that I would describe as an indifference to language. It doesn’t matter to Hägglund which particular term is being shown to follow the logic of deconstruction, whether it be time, hospitality, writing, violence, justice, life, and so on. He abstracts the logic underlying each particular term, leaving their evaluative resonances behind. Having done so, he cannot account for the performative force I have argued Derrida’s writings must necessarily contain.

When I first advanced a version of this claim about Hägglund’s work, he responded with a spirited defense of his view. Much of this defense rests on an interpretation he
offers of the proper place of performative commitments in deconstruction. He writes: “Derrida may indeed oscillate between an analysis of the concept of democracy and a performative commitment to democracy, but the latter cannot be grounded in the former. Rather, Derrida argues that we make commitments because of the exposition to a future that may come to question or undo these commitments.” But this is to mischaracterize the issue. There is no claim being made, by me or by Derrida, that the relation in question is one of grounding. Further, in the alternative he proposes to a relation of grounding, Hägglund leaves out any mention of the constative, focusing only on the second relation raised in the original quote from Derrida, that between the performative and the exposure to the future. This shift in focus remains as Hägglund sums up his position.

Thus, Derrida draws a clear distinction between performative acts of language and the structure of the event that he describes as unconditional. We necessarily commit ourselves to values through performative acts of language, but Derrida maintains that these acts are exceeded from within by the event that makes them possible. As he puts it in “Typewriter Ribbon”: “What happens, by definition, what comes about in an unforeseeable and singular manner, could not care less about the performative” (2002, 146). Derrida’s point is that even the most stable commitment can betray itself or turn out to be misguided because of the exposition to unpredictable events. This does not mean that commitments or values are “arbitrary in their justification,” as Haddad suggests (2009, 137); it only means that they are based on reasons and considerations that are not grounded in deconstruction. The role of deconstruction is not to ground anything but to think through the implications of the unconditional exposition to time.

Hägglund’s claim here is that the distinction between performative acts of language and the unconditional supports his view of deconstruction’s independence from justifying commitments or values. On the one side lie performative acts of language, together with the commitments and values that they make possible, and on the other lies deconstruction, which is focused on the structure of the unconditional. Now things are somewhat complicated by the fact that Hägglund implicates the unconditional in the event that makes performatives possible, since this suggests a relation between the two that might compromise the integrity of the division. But Hägglund’s description of the relation saves the clarity of the distinction. For he presents the conditioning as going in one direction only—the unconditional conditions performatives, and not vice versa. This unidirectionality is supported by the citation from “Typewriter Ribbon,” since in not caring about the performative, the unforeseeable happening (or the unconditional) would be free of what it conditions. The implication of this freedom is that the unconditional can be examined in and of itself. This would not be the case for the performative, since to properly understand it one would need to explore its condition (here the unconditional). But the unconditional itself is said to depend on nothing else. This being the case, deconstruction would be able to go about the task Hägglund
sets it and think the unconditional in isolation, uninterrupted as it were by trying to justify values and commitments.

However, the problem with Hägglund’s view is that it does not match the view of Derrida. As I quoted above, Derrida states that “the to of the ‘to come’ wavers [hésite] between the imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient perhaps of messianicity (nonperformative exposure to what comes, to what can always not come or has already come)” (R, 91/V, 132). This “wavering” or “hesitation” is a movement of oscillation between the two sides of the division, and so the relation that is thought must go in both directions. Further, it is precisely such a dual relation that Derrida articulates in the very paragraph in “Typewriter Ribbon” from which Hägglund cites. There Derrida seeks to describe “the paradoxical antinomy of performativity and the event.” Hägglund isolates one arm of the antinomy, where Derrida speaks of the event exceeding the performative. Equally important is the other arm, to which Derrida refers two sentences earlier: “It is often said, quite rightly, that a performative utterance produces the event of which it speaks.” Thus, far from describing the way the event makes performatives possible, as Hägglund asserts, Derrida is here concerned with the opposite phenomenon, with the way performatives make the event possible. Derrida’s point is that performatives are the condition of certain kinds of event, at the same time as these events exceed their condition. And crucially, if they are to be in a relation of antinomy (a word that, as I discussed in Chapter 1, can be understood as a synonym for “aporia” in Derrida’s writings), then neither performatives nor the events that exceed them can take place without one another. If they could, then the antinomy would be resolved, and this is precisely what Derrida maintains cannot be done.

Now as I noted above, in this account of performative commitments in Derrida’s work Hägglund makes no mention of constative analysis. This contrasts with my own interpretation, which is directed toward the relation between the performative and the constative, not the performative and the unconditional. To repeat, I am concerned with understanding how it is that Derrida’s constative, descriptive analyses of various phenomena (in particular of democracy) at the same time carry a performative force. This is not to say, however, that I think the unconditional is irrelevant. Doing so would ignore an important part of Derrida’s own understanding, since in the original citation from “The Reason of the Strongest” he locates the unconditional in the “to” embedded in the “to come.” This means that if the question is what occurs in Derrida’s constative analysis of “democracy to come,” then Derrida’s view is that in addition to the performative commitment this necessarily invokes, the unconditional in the necessary exposure to the unknown future is also at work. There are thus three terms in play, the constative, the performative, and the unconditional. The key point to underline for the view I am proposing is that the relations between all of these terms are ones of mutual interdependence—there is a “hesitation” or oscillation between all the terms involved. As a consequence, there is no moment or dimension of Derrida’s analysis that is free from the performative. There is performative commitment when
he gives a constative analysis in his texts, and there is performative commitment when the unconditional interrupts or undermines his texts. There is thus no aspect of Derrida’s texts that is free of normative force.

My interpretation claims, therefore, that deconstruction necessarily engages a language that is inescapably infused with contours of value, and it is here that the dimension of normativity in this kind of writing can be located. Now to be sure the kind of normativity here in play falls far short of a single set of prescriptions that would constitute a determined politics or ethics. Deconstruction still does not say what is to be done in all cases. But different events of deconstruction will give rise to particular normative claims, for in their inevitable inheritance of language these events engage with and relaunch particular configurations of value. It remains in addition that none of these normative claims lie under the control of a sovereign I. There is an irreducible alterity in the relation of inheritance, both in the past that is engaged and in the future that is promised. The particularity of the claims is thus exposed to this alterity, and any stability they might obtain is always open to destabilization. But this exposure to alteration does not automatically discount the normative force at work.

Finally, this emphasis on the relation between deconstruction and language also opens up a path to pursue in my own analysis, one that enables a better understanding of what is involved in the act of democratic inheritance, which I have argued is one of the central contributions Derrida has to make to contemporary political thinking. For its inescapability means that the language inherited in democratic discourse is one site on which the process of filtering and sorting—the engagement with the aporias of democracy—will be played out. This, at least, is what I aim to demonstrate in the next two chapters. I do so first by examining in Chapter 5 Derrida’s most substantial act of democratic inheritance, the book *Politics of Friendship*, in which he engages the discourse of the democratic tradition. Then in Chapter 6 I focus on one aspect of Derrida’s democratic discourse that results from this engagement, and seek to expand and enrich it through an interrogation of his use of the vocabulary of birth.