

1 Problematising Violence and Morality

Introduction

How is ‘violence’ defined? Is it possible to locate a moment of origin for violence in human societies, and what does violence tell us about how we come to know and understand the world around us and ourselves? How can social conventions shape our understandings of violence? This chapter theorises a framework for violence, which serves as a thematic lens through which we can explore and problematise moral concerns around circumcision.

First, let’s consider the question *what is violence?*, which is of broad scope and significance. When we speak of ‘violence’, what do we mean? The social sciences have often theorised violence through operative sites and structures such as politics and state relations, crime, military and martial violence governance and dissent, economics and poverty, interpersonal relations, racial relations, and other relations of power. Violence is often theorised in Manichaeian terms, through a dualism of moral and immoral conduct and a dualistic notion of self and other.¹ The resulting tendency of the Manichaeian – or dualistic – frame of reference that prevailed in twentieth century sociology was the attempt to construe violence as being:

the intrusion of an external other upon whatever group, institution, or category one chooses to identify with. Violence, in short, has been widely understood as violation of the self-same in its purity by an external other.

(de Vries and Weber 1997: 1)

The conceptualisation of violence as the intrusion of an *external other* resonates with key arguments on neonatal male circumcision. As I later show, views of those who oppose (intactivists) or advocate for circumcision can be understood through a Manichaeian lens. Not only is there stark division between right (moral) and wrong (immoral) for each group, but there is an assumption by intactivists that the body *prior to circumcision* is integral, whole, intact; hence, circumcision *violates* and compromises bodily autonomy and integrity.

I use the case study of circumcision to explore the limits of common views on violence. I take up the notions of externality, whereby violence is inflicted *upon* someone by another. In contrast to this view, I propose that we can understand (some) violence as related to existence, to being. The differences between these two manifestations of violence – as external, imposed upon, or as conducive to being – are paramount: if violence as necessarily an external violation, an ethical response is to prevent the perpetrator from *doing* the violent act. Studies of violence will consequently focus on the psychology of perpetrators, as we concern ourselves with preventing violent interactions. However, the second manifestation of violence isn't so clear cut: How can we understand violence that is *generative*, conducive to identity and meaning?

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out these two manifestations of violence and establish my critique. For the former manifestation of violence, I turn to works of Sigmund Freud and René Girard.

Freud's contributions to modern psychoanalysis helped shape the ways we think about the human mind, conscious and unconscious thought, the ego and sublimated desires. While Freud's work and method are not without critique, it is because of his enduring influence that I've chosen to discuss his theory on violence as a catalyst for and a shaper of social structure and modern religion. Conversely, Girard's thesis of mimetic theory made great contributions to the field of religion and study. Freud and Girard both theorise the connection between violence, religion, and society by looking at how intertwining of violence, ritual, and human relationships informed our conception of modern religion. Freud and Girard both conceive of violence as an external intervention and rely on a notion of *primordial violence* to refer to an archaic form of violence that is intimately correlated with the formation of religious and social organisation. I call this manifestation of violence *ontology of violence*, a concept that presents a logic wherein *causality* is either catalyst or outcome of an event. In the final section of the chapter, I use the work of Jacques Derrida to replace the concept of *ontology of violence* with a concept of the *violence of ontology*, which is characterised by a violence that is related to existence, the violence of being. It does not necessarily imply any external causality, and in that it is related to existence, to being, it resists definition through binary oppositions.

What is violence?

Sociology has tended to interpret violence through symbols and culture, rather than through its physicality. Classical sociological theorists such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ([1848] 2018) and Max Weber (1968, 1978) theorised violence in relation to material conditions, the State, and State violence. More contemporary social and political theorists such as Hannah Arendt (1970, 1973), Frantz Fanon (2004) and Jean Paul Sartre (1992) further

contributed to theorisations of violence primarily as a tool of power operated by the State, or as a means of social control and resistance. Sociology has tended to focus on relationships between violence and other social forces such as the state, power, politics, governance, institutions, culture, and economies (Walby 2012). Common to these various considerations of violence is the sense that violence involves an active, dominant, oppressing force that imposes upon, implicates, and modifies a weak, even passive counterpart. While violence doesn't always imply a power or capacity imbalance, it is often perceived in negative terms as something that must be prevented and guarded against. Being seen as an exertion of force upon subjects implies that the force or source of violence is external, perhaps even always external.

Philosopher Hent de Vries develops a connection between religion and violence:

Violence, in both the widest possible and the most elementary senses of the word, entails any cause, any justified or illegitimate force, that is exerted – physically or otherwise – by one thing (event or instance, group or person, and, perhaps, word and object) on another. Violence thus finds its prime model – its source, force, and counterforce – in key elements of the tradition called the religious.

(de Vries 2002: 1)

Violence is conceptualised explicitly as any force, whether justified or not, *exerted* physically or otherwise *by one thing on another*. This resonates with the conventional definition of violence outlined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED): violence is a 'deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.' (OED Online, [violence](#), n.: 2021). Implicit in both is the idea that violence is 'forced against', a violation of one thing by an external other which necessitates a distinction between self and other, violator and violated. We see here echoes of Manichaean themes mentioned earlier – a sense of externality and moral dichotomy, whereby the violator is the immoral evil and the violated is integral, good. It is this understanding of violence as *necessarily external* that I want to explore further.

One of my concerns is that this sense of externality already evokes a social, indeed a moral, response, because it delineates at least two players: violator/violated, other/self. Ostensibly, in the example of circumcision, the violator is the person conducting the circumcision and the violated is the child undergoing circumcision. Does violence necessarily require a sense of externality, such that it is imposed upon the self by an external other? Might there be another way to think of violence with regards to rituals such as circumcision? To answer these questions, I turn to Wolfgang Iffsky, who offers us a way to think of violence as it relates to ritual. Iffsky is concerned with how events of mass murder and genocide – such as the Holocaust – came to be, and why violence is such a substantive, constant feature in

human societies. Answers to these questions, or indeed to any discussion of violence, are according to Sofsky 'a battleground of ideologies and illusions' (2003: 16), which indicates the potential for multiple attitudes and approaches to the question of violence. For example: Is violence genetic or cultural? Can we truly determine whether violence is the consequence of a singular or decisive cause, such as genetics and behavioural tendencies? Sofsky writes: 'Among the most comfortable hypotheses is the assumption that the legacy of evolution naturally predisposes us to violence' (2003: 16). This 'comfortable hypothesis' is one that Sofsky seeks to challenge, that genes don't govern natural history. To think of violence simply in genetic terms is to overlook its complexity. Genetic inheritance, even of intricate qualities such as intelligence or aggression, is not enough to tell us about the ways in which violent qualities can manifest. Without turning to genetics for an answer, why do people act violently?

In considering the root of our propensity for violence, Sofsky explores not only the violence of wars and massacres, but also the violence found in seemingly less consequential forms such as football hooliganism and policing; violence of the everyday and the mundane. Sofsky makes a couple of important claims. First, that violence is a social phenomenon and second, there is no essential connection between motive and action:

The nature and extent of many atrocities mislead us into assuming that the perpetrators must have been motivated by particularly violent impulses. This intuition goes against all logic. Human beings can behave in very different ways for one and the same reason, or they can do exactly the same thing on widely different grounds. There is no essential connection between motives and actions. Murders can be committed out of love or hate, avarice or greed, jealousy or indifference. But not everyone who is tormented by jealousy, envies someone else's possessions, or has lost interest in the world inevitably becomes a murderer.

(Sofsky 2003: 17)

Sofsky's claim that there is 'no essential connection between motives and actions' is worth contemplating because it disrupts a key logic of violence that we encountered earlier: the idea that there necessarily must be external and mitigating factors that serve as catalysts for violence. While there *might* be external and mitigating causes of violence, Sofsky argues that we cannot make an essentialist or reductionist connection between motives and actions – while external factors may be associated with violent behaviour, they are not *in essence* correlated.

Sofsky observes the common assumption that there are pathological forces at work in attempts to explain violence as an outcome of a mental derangement. Some see perpetrators as victimised by unhappy childhoods or as the product of watching horror films, as if there were no atrocities before television was invented. Such pathologising arguments are reductive.

There are still other explanations that seek to identify root causes such as social and economic disadvantage, inadequate parenting, political upheavals, stress, unemployment, psychotic urges, drug use, and trauma to list but a few. The assumption that being part of disadvantaged and excluded social groups is a prerequisite for violent behaviour is problematic – if we only identify and blame social and/or psychological issues when it comes to violence, then not only do we risk stigmatising and marginalising already precarious people, but ultimately no one can be held responsible for violent acts and their consequences (Sofsky 2003: 19).

Ultimately, Sofsky argues that pathological reasons such as social inequality, psychological inadequacy, poverty, and isolation cannot adequately explain violence because they don't stand up to examination – even in environments where violence is pervasive, it isn't the case that all people behave violently. We cannot just turn to context to explain violence, so we are prompted to ask: What drives people to 'make use of their freedom to commit violence, how do they cross the border, and what kind of world lies on the other side?' (Sofsky 2003: 21). Here, the word 'freedom' is interesting as it implies 'choice'. In other words, if one's turn to violence is not genetically or socially predetermined, then one must *choose* violence – people have the freedom to choose either to act violently or to refrain from violence. But what conditions such choices one way or the other? What causes people to make use of their freedoms and choose to act in violence? Sofsky argues that although ultimately it is individuals who *do* violence, violence is usually a social process, one that is temporal in nature. In other words, violence isn't necessarily a matter of individual choice, rather violence changes situations and people, and is built into the basic forms of social life, from political and bureaucratic organisation to elemental divisions of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. While we might think violence is a personal choice, it is, in fact, intrinsically social. It is reinforced through political and social organisation, and social norms engender violence as well as restrain it. Following Sofsky, we can say that violence is a social condition, and further, that it is the result of our specific humanity (Sofsky 2003: 8). It is worth teasing out this latter statement: Sofsky indicates that there is something about the very conditions that organise human life, the very things that makes us human, that gears people towards violence. This 'specific humanity' has a closer association with violence than external factors because it means that violence can happen *to* and *by* anyone: Violence is accessible to every single person, regardless of their mitigating environment or situation, and often times even without reason. In other words, violence isn't a perversion, but rather it is tied in with the very experience of being human.

It is Sofsky's analysis of ritual violence that is particularly interesting, as it carries relevance for the Jewish ritual of circumcision. In the first instance, rituals are repetitive and performed at regular intervals, or during certain occasions. This repetition means that a ritual is practiced in essentially the same way throughout a period of time and can span years,

decades, even centuries. Because of this, ritual is a remembering in practice (Sofsky 2003: 213), holding the memory of all the years and times it was practiced prior. Repetition also engenders a notion of *sameness*, connecting individual and collective, connecting past and present, history and community. Rituals facilitate instances of transgression and transformation, marking a shift from the secular to the sacred, from everyday life to the festival (Sofsky 2003: 24). But as a way of creating community spirit, facilitated by means of festivities and joint celebration, ritual is also violent and is a marker of belonging and exclusion. Ritual offers a way for community to come together in shared experience, complicity, and joint action, creating a strong sense of identification and unanimity. The violence of ritual serves a distinct purpose – engender a sense of community to help individuals transcend their personal fear of death and morality (Sofsky 2003: 8). In other words, community gives meaning that extends beyond the singular individual. In providing people with a deep sense of belonging, ‘community’ creates the conditions for individuals to – even willingly – engage in violent actions and obey orders as needed. Ritual violence creates community spirit by establishing bonds of loyalty, connections, and alliances.

The role of ritual lends itself to violence. Some of the oldest forms of violence such as hunting, war, and sacrifices were often performed as rituals, and we see an example of this further on in this chapter in Freud’s study of totemism and totem sacrifice. Sofsky offers other examples such as the sacrificial rites of the Aztecs or the Carthaginians, which were characterised by mass slaughter and bloodshed. Importantly, while violence often exhibits ritual elements, rites don’t elevate violence by giving it meaning (Sofsky 2003: 25). That rituals are violent does not necessarily mean that violence in itself is meaningful. While ‘[v]iolence lends the ritual an aura of gravity and sublimity’ (Sofsky 2003: 25), it can be cruel and senseless.

In ritual, the use of violence reminds participants of life. Bloodshed combined with a joyous festive celebration reminds the community of the sanctity of being, as ‘life is nourished by death’ (Sofsky 2003: 25). It is because so often violence is senseless, visceral, primal, and murderous that we should exercise caution before endowing it with surplus meaning. The fascination with violence is often about the physicality of violence, about the visceral destruction of one body by another, the whimpering of a living being, the smell of blood (Sofsky 2003: 9). Violence is often simply that – violent, ruthless, destructive. Yet, the nature and purpose of ritual violence tells us that violence can also be transformative. While we can think of violence as being a foundational social force, the function of rites is not to elevate violence by giving it meaning (Sofsky 2003: 25). That is, violence can *also* be senseless, it can happen to anyone by anyone, and it’s accessible to any person without reason.

The capacity of rituals to unleash violence suggests that the potential for violence is always already present in some form. If we push this observation a little further, we can suggest that from this perspective, rituals do not

‘generate’ or ‘create’ violence anew, but rather provide an avenue for violence to bubble to the surface. In this respect, violence is always a potential waiting to be released. This discussion of ritual violence is important as it frames ritual as a practice that reinforces community bonds. Rituals bond (and bind) individuals because they generate a sense of community and cohesion. From this perspective, we begin to see emergent links between violence and society: violence – and the potential it carries – manifests in practically all aspects of life and takes various forms.

While it might seem that there is some tension between de Vries’ quote above, stating that there is an intrinsic connection between violence and religion, and Sofsky, for whom there is no essential connection between motive and violence, I suggest that this is not altogether the case. Both theorists view violence as a pervasive force in social organisation and everyday life: the potential for violence in a sense is *everywhere*, can be accessed by anyone and can happen at any time. If de Vries offers us a useful definition of violence as a force exerted – physically or otherwise – by one thing on another, Sofsky gives us a framework through which we can explore what causes people to behave in violent ways and a framing for ritual violence. First, that there is no essential connection between motive and violence, and second, that ritual is a way of linking present and past (Sofsky 2003: 214). While neither theorist necessarily exhibits a Manichaean frame in their work, they do articulate a notion of violence that relies on *externality*. Recall de Vries’ definition of violence as something *imposed upon*. For Sofsky too, violence takes place as an exertion of force by one person external to another.

In what follows, I develop further the connection between violence and ritual and the communal role of violence. To do so, I turn to two theorists who have theorised violence, ritual, and society in different ways, and considered the role violence fulfils in community and social structure. These are Sigmund Freud, selected for his contributions to modern psychoanalysis who informed the ways we think about the human psyche, and anthropologist René Girard who coined the concept of scapegoat mechanism, to theorise people’s habitual tendencies to violence.

Freud

As a psychoanalyst, Freud is concerned with psychological reasonings, and in *Totem and Taboo* he engages in a speculative exercise that traces the origin of religion by combining psychoanalysis with contributions from anthropology and evolutionary biology. I focus on the argument Freud developed in *Totem and Taboo* ([1913] 1990) for its insights to ritual and sacrifice, both of which Freud links to the origin of religion and the formation of a narrative of human society. While Freud’s psychoanalysis has been widely critiqued by writers such as Webster (1996), Friedan (1982), and Eysenck (2002), his work remains influential. Here I am interested particularly in Freud’s theorisation around violence, ritual, and religion.

Totem and taboo

Freud locates the origin of all religious manifestations in totemism, a system of belief in which every person or group of people – such as a clan or tribe – believe they have a deep spiritual connection with another physical being, the ‘totem’. In Freud’s terms, a totem is most often an animal and more rarely a plant or a natural phenomenon that stands in peculiar relation to the whole clan, for whom the totem is the guardian spirit and helper. Following from this relation, the clan is under sacred obligation not to harm, destroy or kill their totem, and must avoid eating the totem’s flesh or benefit from it some other way (Freud 1990: 2).

Freud examines totemic systems among so-called primitive communities and savage communities. In Freud’s terms, primitive communities are the earliest human societies who lived in the simplest form of social organisation, in contrast to ‘savage communities’, which are contemporary societies that lack any sense of modern culture and are similar to primitive communities in their simple social organisation. But there is a link: both primitive and savage societies have equivalent systems of religious and social organisation, namely totemism, where as a general rule the totem is an animal. The totem animal is described as the father, patron, and guardian of the tribe. In return, members of the tribe are under sacred obligation to preserve the totem animal’s life – killing the totem is primal taboo prohibition. The obligation to not harm the totem has one concession: it must not be killed save under prescribed and exceptional circumstances such as for ceremonial purposes. In Sofsky’s terms, the *potential* for violence that up to that point been suppressed is now unleashed through the act of murder and sacrifice. We can think about the totem animal’s sacrifice on these prescribed festival days as ritual practice, a form of violence that serves to engender a sense of community. A pivotal part of such ceremonies is the tribe’s consumption of the totem’s flesh, which Freud argues is an important feature of totemic religions. But what is gained from eating the sacrifice of the totem? It is because killing and eating the totem is forbidden on any other occasion that the ceremonies are extremely meaningful. Clan members are conscious that they’re performing an act that is normally forbidden to the individual and justifiable only through participation of the whole clan. To this end, these sacrificial ceremonies double as a celebration of community. While there is mourning involved, given that the clan mourns the killing of its totem, it is combined with joyous celebration and festive excess; a festive feeling that comes from being able to transgress a prohibitive taboo – the killing and ingesting of the totem.

Consuming the totem’s meat creates a bond between the sacrifice and clansmen, as nothing less than the life of the sacrificial animal resides in its flesh and blood, which is shared among all the participants in the sacrificial meal. Freud subsequently argues that at the root of all blood covenants ‘by which men made compacts with each other even at a late period

of history' (Freud 1990: 498) is this notion of the bond distributed through flesh. Festivities of sacrifice are celebrations of violence that reinforce community bonds – violence is purposeful, productive but also has generative elements, enabling community expression and bond. If we think of totemic societies as precursors to organised religion and modern society – which Freud certainly does – we can deduce that, following from de Vries, there is no violence without (some) religion. Primordial violence takes the form of ritual and sacrifice: indeed, a primary feature of both organised religion and modern secular ceremony is the practice of rituals that serves to engender a strong sense of community and sameness.²

Unity through flesh

Further on, in the final essay of *Totem and Taboo* – 'The Return of Totemism in Childhood', Freud argues that the origins of totemism lie in a singular event. In this final essay, Freud draws on Darwin's claim that the alpha-male grouping was one of the early arrangements of human societies.³ In Freud's words:

There is, of course, no place for the beginnings of totemism in Darwin's primal horde. All that we find there is a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up. This earliest state of society has never been an object of observation. The most primitive kind of organization that we actually come across – and one that is in force to this day in certain tribes – consists of bands of males; these bands are composed of members with equal rights and are subject to the restrictions of the totemic system, including inheritance through the mother.

(Freud 1990: 500)

In the passage above, Freud describes a primal horde ruled by a dominating father who controls the members of his group and drives his sons away so as not to be challenged by them or be required to share the women he claims for himself. Even though the horde could not actually be studied, Freud is curious: as the primal horde organisation differs from the primitive tribal arrangements we do know of (which are composed of members with equal rights and maternal lineage), how did one form of organisation emerge from the other? In other words, how did the transition from a patriarchal tribal horde to a tribe with a totem system take place? We find a clue to this problem in the custom of the totem meal: 'If we call the celebration of the totem meal to our help, we shall be able to find an answer' (Freud 1990: 500). The sacrificial meal is a feature shared by the primal horde and totem clans.

Freud speculated that the shift in tribal organisation, which also signifies the beginning of organised religion, occurred when the primal horde sons grouped together to overtake their father in the fight for dominance. The

father intended to retain his position as the dominant figure, and expelled his sons from the patriarchal group. However, and this is the point where the story pivots, the group of sons return with the intent of killing their father, taking his place. Freud writes:

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually.

(Freud 1990: 500)

This moment is significant because it marks a shift in the structure of the tribe. By eliminating the patriarch, the horde could become community oriented. The violent coup during which the father was usurped is also communal: the sons banded together and accomplished, united, what they could not do alone. Here, it is worth keeping in mind Sofsky's claim that 'ritual violence is a way of creating community spirit. Sacrifice and murder as communal acts establish bonds of loyalty' (Sofsky 2003: 25). It is not just solidifying community but making it new. With regard to Freud's horde, the primal act of murder by the united band of brothers produced communal change. Freud continues:

Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primordial father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things – of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion.

(Freud 1990: 500–501)

The father, once 'the god of the clan' (Freud 1990: 506), is now dead, and the sons carry the burden of his death. Consumed by guilt over the death of their father, the brothers ingest his flesh in a totemic meal which is a powerful symbolic meal where the brothers 'acquire some portion of his strength' through consuming the flesh of the father (Freud 1990: 500). The brothers not only ingest the father's flesh, but they also gain some of his attributes and consequently reclaim the women of the horde, taking the father's place. In devouring the father, the brothers accomplish their identification with him.⁴ Following these events, the murdered father was symbolised in the totem animal. Through sacrifice, they try and bring about reconciliation with their father – a moral response which surfaces from feelings of guilt at the moment the sons realise the consequences of their actions.

The emergence of morality from violence allows Freud to draw a link to Christianity – a religion centred on a figure that is at once God, Father, and Son. Emerging here is the simultaneous origin of religion and morality: a band of brothers joins together to kill their dominating godlike father, and in so doing become remorseful and long for reconciliation with their father. We can pin down the emergence of morality and moral restrictions as reactions to an action that was a crime, albeit one that only became clear to the perpetrators after the fact. Here we see the Manichaean framework, where morality is on the opposite side to violence, as a response *to* violence. Together with the deep sense of guilt that took over the brothers came morality: it was only once the brothers felt guilt that they realised what they had done, and the terrible nature of their patricide became clear. The brothers ‘regretted this deed and decided that it should not be repeated’ (Freud 1990: 512). As the murder of the father brought on a moral reaction, the brothers decide instead to sacrifice an animal each year in commemoration of this event. The repetition of this violent ritual resonates with Sofsky’s claim that rituals are collective acts of remembering, and thus, link present to past.

The sacrifice of the father by his sons is ‘the first great act of sacrifice’ (Freud 1990: 507), an act that consequently paved the way for social organisation, moral restriction, and religion, namely Christianity. In giving his life, the father’s sacrifice was a catalyst for a significant social and moral shift. The moral shift is due to the guilt and longing felt by the brothers: they hated their father who was a dominating, controlling figure, yet loved him and admired him deeply. What’s more, the father – in his dominance of the primal horde – was an obstacle for the brothers’ cravings and sexual desires. While he was alive there was no room for the brothers, and so they sought to kill the controlling patriarch. Once this event took place, the feelings of hatred and resentment subsided, leaving room for underlying emotions of love and admiration to surface, accompanied by guilt and remorse. The elimination of the father is at once bound with a longing for him. In lieu of the father, the son assumes the role of omnipotent ruler. ‘The psychoanalysis of individual human beings’, Freud says, teaches us that ‘the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father’ and more, ‘that at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father’ (Freud 1990: 504). A longing *for* the father resulted in the son taking the place of the father, assuming his role. This ‘longing for the father’ (Freud 1990: 505) constitutes the root of every form of religion.

In Freud’s analysis, we can trace the beginning of religion to this primordial sacrifice of the father by his sons. In this event of violence and sacrifice that underpins organised religion, we see that violence and religion are inextricable and cannot exist without one another. As de Vries put it, there is ‘no violence without (some) religion; no religion without (some) violence’ (2002: 1). Violence and religion are inextricable. The primordial act of violence and murder is already linked with religion and ritual, and hinges on themes of externality and opposition that

characterise the dualism of the Manichaeic frame: father–sons, human–animal, god–human, tribe–individual, and violence–morality.

Violence occupies a foundational place in Freud’s narrative; patricide and cannibalism as catalysts for both social change and for the development of moral restrictions. While Freud’s discussion of the primal horde is a reflection on violence as a constitutive moment of social organisation with moral consequences, its emergent links with the Oedipus complex (namely guilt and jealousy of the father, desire to take his place) indicate to us that we may think of social organisation as already tied in with violence and morality. Freud’s contribution is not simply a theorisation of morality, sacrifice and religion but also a reflection on violence as a constitutive moment of religion and society.

As we see below, Freud’s concept of ‘collective murder’ is close to the themes in René Girard’s work (Girard 2013: 221), who is also concerned with formulating a theory of violence that is fundamentally linked to the formation of the social. Both Girard and Freud were inspired by Charles Darwin’s work in *The Origin of Species* ([1859] 2019). Freud developed Darwin’s thesis of the primal horde as the preliminary form of tribal organisation, into the site of primordial violence that was the catalyst for societal change. Conversely, Girard set out to argue for a theory of universal violence that is in full accord with evolutionary biology (Girard 2013: 353–355). For Girard, just as the theory of evolution and natural selection is the rational principle through which the immense diversity of forms of life is explained, the process of victimisation is the rational principle that explains the origin of the infinite diversity of cultural forms. Importantly, Girard takes the links he makes between the theory of evolution and a theory of violence a step further and argues that violence is instrumental in human evolution.⁵ In contrast with Freud’s theory of primordial violence, which was entirely speculative, for Girard, this moment of violence is real: it is located in a place and time in history and is foundational in the evolution of society. Girard argues that the origin of violence takes place in a real event that should be viewed as ‘absolute beginning’ (Girard 2013: 353). A consequence of this ‘absolute beginning’ or the moment of origin for generative violence is the simultaneous emergence of a surrogate victim, allowing us to theorise the connection between sacrifice, violence, and victim.⁶

Girard

In *Violence and the Sacred* ([1988] 2013), Girard studies patterns of violence in human societies, tribal communities, and mythologies, and identifies an intimate link between sacrifice, violence, and religion. In Girard’s terms, violence is endemic to human societies so much so that ‘if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into “proper channels”’

(Girard 2013: 10), to curtail violence and prevent it from going out of control. To this end, Girard argues that violence and the sacred are inseparable from each other, as violence is ‘the heart and secret soul of the sacred’ (2013: 34).

Desire and violence

For Girard, the violence at the core of social organisation is not a metaphorical violence (like Freud’s speculations on the primal horde), but is rooted in a real event in time. He argues that violence is, in one way or another, mingled with desire (Girard 2013: 163) and puts forward the theory of mimetic desire as a tool through which we can explore human social evolution.⁷ Human desire is by and large mimetic, meaning that a person is likely to imitate another’s desire. This is a primal urge. In Girard’s words:

Once his [sic] basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being.

(emphasis in original, Girard 2013: 164)

Girard characterises the human condition as always already one of lack, and people set out to satiate this lack. Put simply, a person observes that his neighbour seems to be in a better condition than him, so he observes her in order to imitate her condition. If this neighbour – already endowed with superior being – desires an object, then that object must have the capacity to confer a great state of being. The man desires the object that his neighbour desires and imitates her desire. Insofar as human desire is directed towards the other (Girard calls this person the ‘model’), one desires not only what the other possesses, but also what the other *is*. To this end, one desires what the other desires, in order to ‘acquire that being’. This in short is what Girard terms *mimetic desire*: ‘desire itself is essentially mimetic’ (Girard 2013: 164). In varieties of desire there are three elements: the model who desires, the object of desire, and the rival who imitates the model’s desire. Two desires directed towards the same object are bound to clash and result in conflict (Girard 2013: 164). Rivalry does not emerge simply because subject and rival desire the same object; rather the rival desires the object *because* the model desires it. In other words, in desiring an object the model signals to the rival that the object is worth desiring (Girard 2013: 164). It is important to note that the object of desire is not fixed, and that desire is often aimless – one desires without knowing what its objective is. Hence, desire is always related to *another* (the model) that gives desire direction. The model for desire likes to offer themselves as a model to others: ‘he invariably falls back on the formula, “Imitate me!” in order to conceal his own lack of originality’ (Girard 2013: 164). One desires

according to the desire of another, so, one imitates the desire of another, and as both desires converge on the same object, they are destined to clash: ‘mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict’ (Girard 2013: 164). When desire is shared, rivalry and jealousy inevitably arise, and lead to the threat of violence.

Girard argues that the mimetic nature of desire has historically set members of society in conflict with one another. Each rival seeks to reassert their primacy in face of the other. The consequence of this is that communities may be engulfed with rivalry, envy, and violence with no foreseeable recourse: a mechanism had to be put in place to curtail escalating violence. Here, Girard introduces the scapegoat mechanism. In order to prevent a violent crisis, an arbitrary scapegoat is blamed for the violence. It is only through collective condemnation and sacrifice of this (often innocent) scapegoat that the social crisis could be evaded. Curiously, the scapegoat is the only one who comprehends the lie at the heart of the accusation, the only one who knows the ‘truth’ of the community, thus making the scapegoat into a threatening figure.⁸ What effectively alleviates the threat of violence is the sacrifice of the scapegoat because it serves to bring the community together. This event leads to ritual imitations, placing what Girard calls the ‘surrogate victim’ in place of the original victim.

While there is not a clear Manichaean division between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in Girard’s hypothesis of mimetic desire, Manichaean binarism is at work in the scapegoat mechanism. The struggle of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ manifests through the transference of blame onto the scapegoat that now embodies ‘evil’ and wrongdoing. This scapegoat is sacrificed by the community in an attempt for self-preservation. *Externality* – another element of Manichaean violence – is expressed in Girard’s work through the surrogate victim, which is generally an animal or stranger foreign to the community (Girard 2003: 308). The purpose of choosing someone from outside the community is to protect the community from a torrent of violence that might take place if one of its own was sacrificed.

Sacrifice and victim

Girard argues that every culture has an archetypal form of a surrogate victim, whose purpose is to be sacrificed in place of the entire community, and even brings examples from a number of different tribal communities as well as various myths and folklore.⁹ Ritual and sacrifice become a regulatory mechanism that dispels social violence and prevents it from spiralling, preventing further conflict from erupting, and consequently uniting a society (Girard 2013: 15). The generation of social unity is a function of ritual that resonates with Sofsky’s argument that rituals engender community and sameness.

In order to regulate the violence that threatens their group, communities project this communal violence onto a single individual. Once

the process of the surrogate victim as the ‘redeemer’ of the community is established, it becomes mythologised and internalised as part of the society’s cultural memory and history as the figure that saved community from destruction. As cultures and societies progressed, symbols such as animal sacrifices and sacred rituals came to be used in place of human sacrifices. Rituals served to unite the society in recollection of the original victim, whose sacrifice diverted violence from the community. Girard’s discussion of ritual is echoed in Sofsky’s argument that ritual is a form of remembering in practice (Sofsky 2003: 213). And so, the surrogate victim serves as a substitute for all members of the community, protecting them from ensuing violence, by sacrifice. Girard continues:

The function of sacrifice ... not only allows for but requires a surrogate victim – in other words, violent unanimity. In ritual sacrifice the victim, when actually put to death, diverts violence from its forbidden objectives within the community.

(Girard 2013: 114)

In this context, ‘violent unanimity’ means an act of violence accepted and adhered to by the community, with the intention of curbing violent outbreaks and uniting the community. But ritual and violence aren’t only elements of primordial groups; religion, violence, ritual, and sacrifice are intrinsically linked: ‘All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual’ (Girard 2013: 347). In other words, underpinning the social is ritual and sacrifice. Circumcision, too, must be considered in relation to its ritual roots as we see in [Chapter 3](#), a relation intactivist and activist arguments effectively sever.

Inevitably, religion strives to subdue violence. In an extension of the religious regulation of violence, religious authorities instil nonviolence as an active force in daily life and as a force that mediates daily life and spiritual life (Girard 2013: 22). Sacrifice is both sinful and saintly, as well as a legitimate and illegal exercise of violence (Girard 2013: 22). In essence, to prevent violence from running wild, religion uses rites as performative mitigating measures.

Both Freud and Girard explore the origin point of violence and talk about a definitive moment of violence that is the catalyst for a major societal change. They offer us a framework to think of ‘primordial violence’ – an original or inaugural moment of violence that is linked to the formation of society. An expression of this moment of primordial violence is found in every culture, society, and mythical narrative. They see sacrifice as instrumental in that it is not only symbolic but also productive: it is a moral imperative because it serves to correct, alter, or fix the violation caused by social crisis. Sacrifice provides redemption. Still today, in Christianity, there are remnants of that first totemic ritual that reflect the eating of the flesh of

the father who in his death redeemed the sin of his sons, manifest in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Freud and Girard provide us with what I call an *ontology of violence*, a concept that exhibits a characteristic of violence that is a 'logic of causality'. But must violence always be reduced to a primary moment? While these theorists allow us to conceptualise violence as being intrinsically linked with ritual and religion, this violence also relies on a sense of *externality*. Can we conceptualise of violence that is somehow related to existence, the violence of being? This would be a violence that is not necessarily a causal happening, because it does not hinge on a primary moment. Such a conception of violence would reflect its livedness.

Derrida's response

My examination of Freud and Girard has demonstrated their commitment to an ontology of violence that stresses an oppositional logic between self and other that is embedded in a logic of externality. Both exhibit Manichaeic qualities insofar as they identify a source of violence (a perpetrator) and an effect of violence (a victim). This view may inhibit us from understanding the *livedness* of violence, specifically, the livedness of circumcision. This section engages the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida to seek an alternative to Freud and Girard's ontology of violence and in doing so, I offer the concept of *violence of ontology*. My choice of Derrida is deliberate:

To approach my discussion of Derrida I refer to two sources: *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More To Follow)* (2002a) and *The Gift of Death* (2007c). The first allows me to examine Derrida's treatment of the story of Adam naming all the animals that roam the earth in Genesis. The second allows me to examine Derrida's treatment of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. These texts help me to establish a way of looking at violence as a generative force that can contribute to identity and the production of meaning. Through my discussion of Derrida's treatment of the tale of Adam I wish to highlight another approach to primordial violence, an act that arguably re-lives itself in the human-animal relationship to this day. Derrida offers an example of a primordial violent act that is not singular, but rather continues to be present and reproduced in every human-animal relationship, and in fact produces the meaning we make of this relationship. Such a *generative* expression of violence can also be seen in the ritual of circumcision, and Derrida gives me the tools to make that argument. Second, I choose to focus on Derrida's treatment of the Sacrifice of Isaac as an occasion to challenge a Manichaeic framework of violence, whereby 'violence' is starkly opposed to values such as 'good' or 'moral'. My challenge is based on the notion that intactivist and activist arguments on circumcision hinge on this division: circumcision is violent and thus immoral, or circumcision is a medical necessity and thus moral respectively. With the sacrifice of Isaac, we have an example of a violent event that is at once moral (insofar as God demanded it) and immoral (murder).

Derrida's ontology

In 'The Animal', Derrida argues that an opposition between human and animal organises modern metaphysics. Writing about the experience of being 'caught' naked in front of his cat, Derrida says: 'It is as if I were ashamed, therefore, naked in front of this cat, but also ashamed for being ashamed' (Derrida 2002a: 372). What is it about this encounter that made him suddenly feel self-conscious and aware of his nakedness, his being exposed? Where did this shame come from, Derrida wonders?

Derrida begins to deconstruct one facet of the animal–human opposition by beginning with Genesis – the biblical story of creation. There are two accounts of creation in Genesis, Derrida reminds us, and the narratives differ. The first one has God create man and woman at the same time; they are equal to each other. In the second narrative, however, God creates man (in Hebrew, Ish) – Adam (the man, or Ish, who in this telling has a name) – and after Adam fails to find a partner for himself from all the creatures on the earth, God creates woman (in Hebrew, Isha) from Adam's own body.¹⁰ In this narrative there is a trace of man in woman (Ish in Isha), whereas in the first they were individual creations.¹¹ What Derrida finds curious is that Adam was charged with naming all living animals. It is worth considering Derrida's words in full, as he recounts the differences between the narratives of creation. In the first narrative, Derrida points out, God commands 'man-woman' to 'command the animals, but not yet to name them'¹² (Derrida 2002a: 385). Regarding the second narrative, Derrida writes:

On the one hand, the naming of the animals is performed *at one and the same time*, before the creation of Isha,¹³ the female part of man, *and*, as a result, before they perceive themselves to be naked; and they are at first naked without shame ("The two of them are naked, the husband-man and his wife; they don't blanch on account of it.") After a certain serpent – one we shall return to – comes by, they will perceive themselves to be naked, and not without shame.

(emphasis in original, Derrida 2002a: 385)

What is implied here is significant: the naming of the animals was performed by Ish (man) alone, before the creation of Isha (woman), and before either of them knew shame. Ish had named all the animals, realising in the end that there was no partner for him; his singularity suddenly became a lived, embodied experience. It was at this point that Ish turned to God, asking for a partner. In a sense, the act of naming was the catalyst for self-awareness, prompted by a profound sense of loneliness, an attempt to locate one's place in the world. Derrida continues:

On the other hand, and this is especially important, the public announcing of names remains *at one and the same time* free and *overseen*, under

surveillance, under the gaze of Jehovah who does not for all that intervene. He lets Adam, he lets man, man alone, Ish without Ishah, the woman, freely call out the names. He lets him go about naming alone. But he is waiting in the wings, watching over this man alone with a mixture of curiosity and authority. God observes: Adam is observed, within sight, he names under observation.

(emphasis in original, [Derrida 2002a](#): 385)

Derrida's brief but considered pause on 'naming' is meaningful, as it brings the human–animal opposition to the foreground. In a sense, Derrida's examination of 'naming' is a consideration of a particular philosophical violence against animals. This silencing, as Adam now speaks for animals in that he decides how they will be known and called, is a violent act; a primordial sin against animals who are denied a voice. Indeed, their identities are now always already in relation to Adam: naming is akin to knowing, and in naming animals Adam has claimed authority over them, their very existence and being are called into recognition by Adam's naming. This initiates the violence of the moment when an animal-otherness was established and reinforced. It is, in other words, a violence of ontology, rather than an ontology of violence, because the violence Derrida writes of has to do with *the becoming of being* (both animal-being and human-being).

For the paradisiacal animals, the moment of naming was the moment where their *animal-otherness* was reinforced as it was Ish – man – who named all others. This identity giving, meaning-making event simply articulated a primal human–animal, human–other divide. The moment of naming constitutes a philosophical violence that eventually leads to a technological violence, as the animal will always remain *other to* the human, external to it.

Derrida's preoccupation with the violence of naming recurs throughout his work. Notably, *On the Name* ([1995a](#)) is a collection of three essays dedicated to the various ethical, political, and linguistic issues of 'naming'. Derrida's interest in names, particularly the 'proper name' (and to this extent – the signature) is derived from names being a mark of propriety and ownership. At stake are the terms of 'responsibility' and the 'indefinite paradox of narcissism': 'Suppose that X, something or someone (a trace, a work, an institution, a child), bears your name, that is to say, your title', says [Derrida \(1995a: 12\)](#). As you have given your name to X, you think that all that returns to X 'in a direct or indirect way' returns to you. That you bear some responsibility for the success of the child/institution/work. Such thinking is a common illusion, a product of narcissism, argues Derrida, as you are not your name: a name is merely a representation one identifies with and appropriates. Given this, X does very well without you or your life, meaning – without the place to which it could return. Conversely, if X does not want your name anymore, or breaks free from it, or chooses for itself another name – that which bears (or has borne) your name is autonomous

and powerful enough to live without you. What returns to your name is the ability to disappear in your name, not to return to itself (Derrida 1995a: 13).

The paradox of the name is thus one of response and responsibility (when someone calls my name there is already an expectation of response in the call. Is it not my responsibility to respond, then? Might this mean my response is not genuine, and thus not a response *worthy of its name*?). It will be helpful to think of this in relation to the aforementioned tale. When Adam spoke the animals' name, he at once bore responsibility to those beings. But what might this response be, now that the animals have been silenced, or denied their ability to respond? It is Adam who spoke for them, after all, who chose their names and how they will be identified. Animals were not given the opportunity to speak and claim their being. This is the paradox of violence: naming the animals was a primordial act of violence, but implied in this act is a *silencing*, hence Adam denies the animals the capacity to respond to the call of their name, or indeed to call Adam's name. Violence doubles as an inclusion (of non-human beings into the cohort of animals) and exclusion (from the human cohort).

At this point I want to turn to *Circumfession*, where Derrida reveals a personal link between identity and the name.¹⁴ 'My secret name' (Derrida 1993: 87), says Derrida, referring to his second name – Elie – given to him at the time of his circumcision, and not spoken about since¹⁵:

Elie: my name – not inscribed, the only one, very abstract, that ever happened to me, that I learned, from outside, later, and that I have never felt, borne, the name I do not know, like a number (but what a number! I was going to say matricule, thinking of the plague of the dead Elie that Marquerite wears or of the suicide, in 1955, of my friend Elie Carrive) anonymously designating the hidden name, and in this sense, more than any other, it is the given name, which I received without receiving in the place where what is received must not be received, nor give any sign of recognition in exchange (the name, the gift), but as soon as I learned, very late, that it was my name, I put into it, very distractedly, on one side, in reserve, a certain nobility, a sign of election, I am he who is elected [celui qu'on élit], this joined to the story about the white taleth (to be told elsewhere), and some other signs of secret benediction (12-23-76).

(emphasis in original, Derrida 1993: 83–84)

Derrida finds out about his 'secret name', a discovery that had great impact.¹⁶ It is 'the given name, which I received without receiving in the place where what is received must not be received'. I suspect that this refers to the event of *Brit Milah*, that is his circumcision and induction into Jewish male lineage, and even into a particular vocabulary or language. For Derrida, much like the first animals under Adam, the name (Elie) is something he 'received without receiving'. Arguably it is impossible to receive a name, for until one is called by that name it remains untold, a secret, and thus neither called

nor received. And again, from the perspective of the primal animals, the moment of being given a name, which was called and received (but could not be responded to), was the moment their *animal-otherness* was reinforced, and underpinned the primal human–animal/other divide. The impossibility of the ‘secret name’ means that one is denied the opportunity to respond to the call, in effect rendered voiceless.

Let us return to Derrida’s discussion in ‘The Animal’ to further consider the implications of naming:

God lets him, Ish, speak on his own, call out on his own, call out and nominate, call out and name, as if he were able to say, “I name,” “I call.” God lets Ish call the other living things all on his own, give them their names in his own name, these animals that are older and younger than him, these living things that came into the world before him but were named after him, on his initiative according to the second narrative. In both cases, man is in both senses of the word *after* the animal. He follows him. This “after,” that determines a sequence, a consequence, or a persecution, is not in time, nor is it temporal; it is the very genesis of time.

(emphasis in original, [Derrida 2002a](#): 386)

Here, Derrida pauses on Ish’s naming of the animals as a process of meaning attribution, one that interrupts the chronology of ‘creation’. Ish names – and thus knows – the animal that came before him, the animal that Ish followed. Other than being an act of identification, naming is also an act of asserting dominance and ownership and cementing a hierarchical relationship. This complex relationship between the animal and Ish, who came after the animal and yet named it and knew it (so, the animal predated Ish, saw and knew the world before Ish, and saw the (be)coming of Ish, is now not only named and given meaning *by* Ish but also *because* of the existence of Ish), is reproduced in Derrida’s anecdote of his ‘cat encounter’: ‘The animal is there before me, there close to me, there in front of me-I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me’ ([Derrida 2002a](#): 380).

Derrida develops a complex account of the relation between naming, call, and response. Derrida confesses to us about feeling ‘disarmed before a small mute living being’ – his cat ([Derrida 2002a](#): 388). I want to draw your attention to the word ‘mute’, as it is particularly meaningful in the context of Derrida’s narrative on the animal. Indeed, it is on the question of this very ‘muteness’ that the problem of violence hinges for Derrida. The trace of this muteness, this silence, leads us again to the story of Genesis:

In fact that tradition assigns to nature and to the animality named by Adam a sort of ‘deep sadness’ (*Traurigkeit*). Such a melancholic mourning would reflect an impossible resignation, as if protesting in silence

against the unacceptable fatality of that very silence: the fact of being condemned to muteness (*Stummheit*) and to the absence of language (*Sprachlosigkeit*).

(Derrida 2002a: 388)

This deep sadness, this melancholic mourning, is the defining mark of the animal Adam followed. Adam had language; he spoke *for* the animals, and thus deprived them of speech. Adam's words denote the absence of language for the animals he followed. Derrida demonstrates how violence is tied in with language, with word, or lack or incapacity thereof.

We must not forget that Ish (Adam) came after the animal because this 'after' indicates a relation in time and also indicates the pursuit of something, of someone. Thus, these animals came before the human, these animals were on the earth before Ish, watched Ish become being, and yet it was Ish who ascribed them an identity; he who previously followed the animal now has the animal following him. Derrida links the shame he felt when his cat observed his nudity to this very moment:

For so long now it is as if the cat had been recalling itself and recalling that, recalling me and reminding me of this awful tale of Genesis, without breathing a word. Who was born first, before the names? Which one saw the other come to this place so long ago? Who will have been the first occupant, and thus the master? Who the subject? Who has remained the despot, for so long now?

(Derrida 2002a: 387)¹⁷

But of course, Derrida's 'little cat' (2002a: 374) cannot experience Derrida's nudity as Derrida experiences his own nudity in the face of his little cat. This little cat is always already mute, always already Derrida's other.¹⁸

For Derrida, the act of naming the animals in Genesis is the primordial violent act. It is violent in that it determines and defines the animal (and consequently the human). This act, which preceded the 'original sin' of Adam and Eve, was in fact the original moment when man sinned against his surroundings. Although it is only implied, I consider the 'sin of naming' in Derrida's discussion as being the first, original, primordial sacrifice. This is because in naming animals, Ish named all that they are, and consequently, determined all that they could be: he delineated and demarcated identity. Ish also named everything that they are not and that they could not be. The consequence is that these animals are always already secondary. Because of this very act of naming, their silence is now a trace of that first silence: Ish walks the earth naming the animals while God observes, and the animals, deprived of a voice, now speak a silence that is the longest sentence – one that is not uttered through words. This is the first moment of violence, this moment of continuous silencing. It is also the ontological animal sacrifice: it enables Ish to go and become the first man, the first of many.

Derrida's treatment of the Genesis story gives us another way to conceptualise violence. Freud, as we saw, wrote about primordial violence as an event of murder that was not exclusive to prehistory, or a single society. The sacrificial crisis for Freud, the sacrifice of the father by his sons was an allegorical narrative that tells the story of 'originary violence', the kind that informs sacrificial and commemorative rites. Freud's allegory of the sacrifice of the father by the son outlines a scenario that accounts logically for the constitution of a community in which the members are totalised not only by their sharing of guilt – the guilt of sacrificing their father – but also by the extent to which they are unable to fully enjoy the consequences of their act. And for Girard, the moment of human origin is similarly located in a moment of violence. Intrinsically linked with the moment of primordial violence is the presence of a victim, which serves to ground Girard's theory 'in historical and cultural fact' (McKenna 1992: 24). Both Freud and Girard explore the origin point of violence, or in other words – the ontology of violence. We considered a different narrative in Derrida. We saw that for Ish, or rather Adam, as for the animals, the event of becoming is always already linked with violence. For Adam, the event of naming is an inflicting of violence, but also, a giving into violence. For the animal, the moment of naming deprives the animal of voice, of language, of word, and simultaneously the sadness of nature and animality are born through this muteness. One might argue that one reading of Adam's naming of the animals would be to say that Adam is an external force that violates and yet, it is possible to suggest another way to read this, a reading of more subtlety. For in 'following' the animal, we can never be entirely certain that this violence is *always* external. And so, rather than violence being a catalyst for – or the outcome of – an event, as in Freud and Girard, we appreciate that Derrida's 'violence of ontology' is commensurate with identity formation and being, independent of whether it is of the animal or the human. Derrida contrasts Freud and Girard's 'ontology of violence' with the idea of 'violence as ontology'.

Having established the idea of a violence of ontology as distinct from an ontology of violence, I want to prepare the ground for a consideration of circumcision. In what follows I expand on violence as it pertains to 'sacrifice' in Derrida's work, and consider Derrida's conception of sacrifice through one of the oldest stories of sacrifice, the Sacrifice of Isaac, to suggest that circumcision can be considered a kind of sacrifice.

Biblical sacrifice

In *The Gift of Death* (2007c [1991]) Derrida compares and contrasts his own conception of responsibility with Kierkegaard's in order to extend and deepen his other writings on the gift and sacrifice. Specifically, the discussion centres around the story in Genesis 22: the Sacrifice of Isaac.¹⁹ For Derrida, the very possibility of sacrifice, especially the ultimate sacrifice of one's own life for the sake of another, comes into question.

Although the story of the Sacrifice detailed in Genesis 22 (1–19) is well known, I offer a concise summary:²⁰ God commands Abraham by some test of faith to sacrifice one of his – then two – sons, namely Isaac, on Mount Moriah with the following words: ‘Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of’ (Genesis 22: 2).²¹ In a show of absolute obedience and faith, Abraham answers God’s call. Together Abraham and Isaac make a three-day journey, each step bringing them closer to the place where Isaac would find death. We can only imagine how heavy those steps were for Abraham, and how light they were for his young son – oblivious to the true purpose of the journey. When they reach their destination, a confused or curious Isaac notes that he sees the fire and wood for the offering, but not the sacrificial lamb (Genesis 22: 7). Abraham replies, ‘God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son’ (Genesis 22: 8). To us, who know of God’s demand, Abraham’s answer is painfully true. God did provide the lamb for sacrifice – Isaac is the son God promised to Sarah and Abraham. There we have Abraham, the chosen one, the person God chose to sign an eternal covenant with,²² a covenant signed in flesh, one ensuring protection, land, and livelihood to all his kin; a nomadic shepherd who would become the father of nations, taking a knife to one of his own flock. Other than Abraham’s blind obedience we are told nothing of his thoughts at the time. Isaac’s voice, which we just heard, becomes suddenly silent: does he resist? Does he weep? Does he plead? We are not told. All we know is the following: ‘and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son’ (Genesis 22: 10–11). Before the knife could strike Isaac, an angel of God appears and calls out to Abraham: “‘Abraham, Abraham.’” And he said: “‘Here am I’”. And he [the angel] said: “‘Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me’” (Genesis 22: 11–12). Here we learn what was behind God’s demand of Abraham: it was to test Abraham’s faith, devotion, and obedience. At the instant that Abraham readies his knife to ‘slay his son’, God – seeing Abraham’s faith and obedience are true – sends an angel to stop the sacrifice and instructs Abraham to sacrifice a nearby ram in Isaac’s stead. Abraham follows the angel’s orders, and Isaac is spared.

How does Derrida approach this tale? According to Derrida, the binding of Isaac points to ‘absolute dissymmetry’ in the ethical relationship of Abraham and God (Derrida 2007: 91), manifesting in two ways. First, there is no ‘face-to-face’ exchange of looks between God and Abraham, ‘between the other and myself’. Derrida says: ‘God looks at me and I don’t see him and it is on the basis of this gaze that singles me out [*ce regard qui me regarde*] that my responsibility comes into being’ (Derrida 2007: 91).²³ The dissymmetry is present in the following imbalance: the gaze sees me without my

seeing it gaze upon me. Put differently, one knows they are being seen though one never sees or knows their seer. This bears resemblance to the vision of God who observed Adam as he named the animals on earth. Second, even as Abraham does not see God's gaze, it becomes his concern – *ce regard qui me regarde* – for Abraham is not only immediately called to respond to God's gaze and demands but is also made accountable to God's will. It is Abraham who holds the knife to his son's neck. To respond to God's will Abraham must betray the ethics that govern his relationship with his son. Derrida says that the drive to sacrifice is characterised by a sort of practical drive, 'a form of motivation that is also instinctive, but an instinct that is pure and practical' (Derrida 2007: 91). What Derrida expresses here is the terrible experience of facing and obeying a God who has just posed an 'unjustifiable order' in the name of love, in the name of the person – the son – that you love. Not only is Abraham called to offer his son for sacrifice but according to God's request Abraham must perform the deed on his son, *whom he loves*. In the gesture of taking one son to sacrifice there is also a severing in relation to his other son, a son whom, God implies, Abraham *does not love*. We can think of God's violent demand as follows: Abraham is called to sacrifice not one son, but two – one to God and the other to love. This choice between sons (the older born Ishmael, son to Hagar, and Isaac, son to Sarah) is an act of terror, Derrida argues. We might even go so far as to call it violent. Abraham realises he must obey this order for which no justification can be provided. Immediately, says Derrida, 'this situation goes beyond any ethical, any human, level' (Derrida interviewed in [Caputo, Hart, and Sherwood 2005](#): 34). Effectively, God's demand turns Abraham into a criminal – it is at once a crime to disobey God and a crime to obey him. For Derrida, then, violence and sacrifice are articulated through this happening: Abraham is a murderer. Even as an angel of God is sent down, calling: 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad', following from which Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw behind him a ram 'caught in the thicket by his horns', which he offered up for a burnt-offering instead of Isaac. Even following the release of Isaac, Abraham is a murderer. It is as if Abraham murdered his son, even if the action did not take place. It does not matter that Abraham did not end up executing his son, for he intended to do so – he loved Isaac so much that he would kill him. Moreover, the choice of Isaac required Abraham to choose between sons, and effectively sever his bond with his other son – he did not love Ishmael enough to sacrifice him to God. Abraham's responsibility lies in his response to God. No matter what decision Abraham ended up making, each one would involve a betrayal of ethics. The concept of responsibility is in its essence incoherent, unknown, an 'ordeal of the undecidable' (Derrida 2007: 5). In other words, Abraham chose to respond with ethics towards God, over his ethical commitments to his kin:

Abraham accepts that the relation with God is wholly asymmetrical, that God can say to him, "I elect you in order that you elect one of your

sons, you must elect him as the one you love. You must love him more than the other in order to kill him.” Here we have the experience of a terrible duty. To act in obedience to God you must give up any justification, any humanly intelligible justification. You have to give up having any knowledge of the decision.

(Derrida interviewed in [Caputo, Hart, and Sherwood 2005](#): 35)

The sacrifice is amplified, as implied in the demand ‘take the son, your only son, whom you love’ – Abraham must also sacrifice the love and the relationship he has with his firstborn, Ishmael. There is an implication of violence in the very act of choice, thus paradoxically the ethics of sparing his son from murder is contrasted with the ethics of a father denying his son love. Furthermore, Derrida says: ‘It is a demand that goes beyond love and out of it, as God says, “the one you love.” This is the absolute religious experience, the pure act of faith, the asymmetrical obedience to an absurd order’ (Derrida interviewed in [Caputo, Hart, and Sherwood 2005](#): 35).

For Derrida, the sacrifice of Isaac demonstrates that ethics is precisely not the universal, but rather the private, the singular, the unjustifiable. This tale is a perfect iteration of this singular unjustifiable ethics: it tells the story of a father who intended to sacrifice his son on God’s demand. In this case, Abraham has always already committed a crime – regardless of what he would have done (a crime against God, or a crime against his sons). This allows Derrida to observe that ethics is ungrounded, metaphysically and rationally; an ethical decision is that which cannot be communicated or justified in universal terms ([Goldman 1998](#): 9). This is because ethics begins with the other. This point is dependent upon Derrida’s assertion in *The Gift of Death* that ‘every other (one) is every (bit) other’ ([Caputo, Hart, and Sherwood 2005](#): 68). The reason every other one is so completely other is because, for Derrida, every other is secret and mysterious; there is always an element of unknowability.

My discussion here has been an effort to consider the origins of violence. My discussion of Derrida has allowed me to propose another way of thinking about violence that is not limited to a point in time or a historical event, for he allows us to consider the possibility of a violence of ontology at the heart of the being-becoming of identity, and an ethics that is unjustifiable in universal terms.

If, as Derrida implies, identity is deeply informed by violence, then identity is continually shaped and (re)constituted by violence in profound ways. Put differently, violence is linked to identity and to being. The very process of becoming being, becoming self, is in itself always already violent. This is because identity is a process – it happens over and over, a continuous ongoing happening: it is violent because this becoming being is already linked to identity and to the other. Violence is the means through which identity is constituted. The violence of the circumcision ritual reflects the connections between writing, identity, and violence.

Manichaean violence reconsidered

My discussion of Derrida makes it possible to argue that conceptualisations of violence which depend on externality and opposition, what I have called ‘Manichaean violence’, insufficiently encapsulate the generative facet of violence and misunderstand the nature of a moral and ethical response. Consequently, I wish to replace the concept of ‘ontology of violence’ articulated in the works of Freud and Girard with the idea of a ‘violence of ontology’. I want to link the violence of ontology to the becoming being of bodies.²⁴ In this regard, it is, and perhaps must necessarily be linked with identity. In subsequent chapters, I use the ritual of Jewish circumcision as a case study to consider how violence is produced in, and by, the very becoming of bodies. As we will see, circumcision is a case study because it illustrates my argument with clear and exact terms and is embedded in a grammar of identity, ethics, and violence.

For now, I want to explain why I want to resist the prevailing conceptualisation of violence as an external force intervening into, or onto, a self who is wholly separated from its violator-other. Such assumptions are at the heart of Girard and Freud’s tendency to locate violence in a specific place and time, in a known narrative, one that is symbolised and repeated through ritual. The language around Manichaean violence is such that it evokes a certain kind of response that many of us are familiar with. Consider the following words used to describe and define ‘violence’: deliberate, physical, unlawful, abuse, exercise of power, unreasonable, destructive, overwhelming, injury, harm, breach, and so on. Each of these terms assumes that there is a ‘blank slate’ or a thing that exists pre-violence, and that lends itself to be violated upon. But can this assumption be sustained? Is there ever a moment where a thing can be present, static, and blank, such that it may be intervened with, and modified in a potentially harmful and damaging way? It seems to me that the answer is ‘no’ because this assumption assumes the possibility of a ‘not already violated being’. My discussion of Derrida has allowed me to call into question the notion that violence interrupts, disrupts, and intervenes into a ‘not already violated’ being.

Next, an important question is whether the harm produced by the violence of ontology necessarily means that it is destructive. One of the features of thinking of the violence of ontology is that it is generative and creative in its harm. Here again, Derrida provides the thematic resources to help build my theoretical foundation. As long as we think of violence in relation to becoming (that is, a being that is always in progress) the very experience of violence, the exercise of force can be characterised as creative and generative.

Before proceeding, there are some issues regarding the violence of ontology that I would like to acknowledge from the outset. I recognise that by putting forward this theory, one possible criticism is that I have done away with the notion of ‘the victim’. While my understanding of violence is linked

to the being becoming, understood as an iterative process, without a point of origin or conclusion, it could be argued that I am diminishing the power, place, gravitas of normative violence, and in this same gesture, therefore sacrificing the notion of the victim. This is potentially dangerous as it erases the notion of victimhood – a very real, lived, and painful experience. But this distorts my argument. What I am arguing is that the Manichaean framework is not the sole framework through which violence manifests. Specifically, Manichaean approaches to violence do not – and should not – exhaust our conception of what violence is. Rather it enables us to consider violence in a certain way, with certain parameters, relevant to certain scenarios. Violence can be ontological, just as ontology – as I’ve shown in my discussion of Derrida – can be violent. In my view, it is possible to think of a kind of violence that is linked to a being becoming meaning, and this meaning is made possible through violence. Viewed from this perspective, I think we can better navigate the process of being becoming in the world.

My discussion of the ontology of violence and the violence of ontology enables an opening up or widening of our conception of being becoming. If we are to use morality as a means to respond to violence, then morality is already embedded within violence itself. Rather than morality being necessarily external to violence, a response to it, I wish to argue that they are mutually constitutive. By this I mean that violence can never be deferred or externalised as it is always already present. Now, discourse on the morality and ethics of circumcision is shaped by a general commitment to – and thinking through – Manichaean violence. The assumption is that circumcision is unethical because it violates moral codes. The procedure of circumcision is framed by a Manichaean perspective of right and wrong. Simply put, circumcision is considered unethical because to inflict a cut, a wound, is itself immoral and hence unethical. As a logical consequence, the only seemingly ethical response available is to not circumcise. This perspective holds that circumcision is a violent procedure that violates the integrity and wholeness of the body. Because the infant cannot consent to the procedure, circumcision is an infringement of agency. This view advances a ‘Manichaean violence’. But as I have suggested, to dismiss violence – all violence – as something that is always negative and offensive, as something which must be protected against, even guarded against, is to understand violence in a restrictive sense.

But theory is one thing and practice another. To this end, we must consider a fundamental question about circumcision: is the problem of whether circumcision is moral or immoral really that clear cut, so to speak? I think it is important to put pressure on the insistence that violence must be something that is guarded against when, in the case of circumcision, it might be possible to think of the very act of violence as imbued with meaning. And so, in the next chapter, I turn to consider two major stakeholders in the circumcision debate: anti-circumcision activists and pro-circumcision advocates. I consider their arguments primarily from a secular and medical perspective next and treat the question of Jewish circumcision in [Chapter 3](#).

Notes

- 1 *Manichaeism* – a major religion formed in the third century CE premised on a moral struggle between good and evil – was popularised as a socio-political concept by Frantz Fanon in the mid-twentieth century. In Fanon's scathing writings on colonialism and post-colonialism, 'the colonial world is a Manichaean world' (Fanon 2004: 6). There is the colonising force and the colonised; while the former is imposing, dominating, controlling, the latter is portrayed as impervious to any ethics or morals. Furthermore, not only is the colonised – or native – perceived as not possessing any values, they represent the negation of values (generally that of the coloniser). To this end, the 'native' is perceived as the enemy of values, or 'absolute evil' (Fanon 2004: 6). Conversely, it is because colonisers perceive themselves as holding values that they are able to justify the violence of colonisation and colonising practices. Specifically, these are 'Western' or 'White' values that find their foundation in Greco-Roman philosophy and espouse key notions such as individualism and enlightenment. Fanon's theory on violence as a tool and product of colonisation and its resistance is useful as a way of contextualising how 'Manichaeism' is used in contemporary politico-social arguments.
- 2 One example of modern secular ceremonies is national ceremonies around citizenship and national identity, which engender community spirit, nationalism, and solidarity (see Carlin, Jones, and Laugesen 2020).
- 3 Darwin speculated that the alpha-male group was one of the early arrangements of human society – a group of females and males dominated by an alpha-male who controlled the group, including the male kin.
- 4 There is resonance between the primordial brothers' urges to take the place of the father and claim his women and Freud's Oedipus complex.
- 5 Andrew McKenna argues that Girard's project holds out for a unified theory in the human sciences (McKenna 1992: 11).
- 6 Notably, Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (2013) dedicates a whole chapter to Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Girard argues that for many Freudians there has been an 'antireferential prejudice' when it comes to criticising Freud and thinking about problems in his work, especially *Totem and Taboo*, which is considered Freud's most problematic work: 'everyone seems intent on covering *Totem and Taboo* with obloquy and condemning it to oblivion' remarks Girard (2013: 221). This is due to the themes of the text: Freud discusses incest, murder, and cannibalism, among other themes. However, Girard does not want to pass over *Totem and Taboo* in silence. Girard's intervention into the theme of 'collective murder' is his notion of the 'surrogate victim', a mechanism that, according to Girard, 'eluded Freud', and thus constitutes what he failed to recognise the *modus operandi* of violence and collective murder.
- 7 'Mimetic' comes from the Greek word *mimesis*, meaning 'to imitate'. Girard usually distinguishes 'imitation' from 'mimesis'. While the concept 'imitation' is usually understood as the positive aspect of reproducing someone else's behaviour, 'mimesis' usually implies the negative aspect of rivalry.
- 8 The scapegoat is the only one who knows the 'truth' as they are the only ones who know they're truly innocent.
- 9 Such as the stories of Oedipus and Dionysus, wherein the latter is used as a point of reference for sacrificial rites among the Swazi (Girard 2013: 286)
- 10 In Genesis, the words defining 'man' and 'woman' are varied. I want to take a closer look at this for the sake of clarity. In the first narrative of Genesis, we see the following sentence: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female created he them' (Genesis 1: 27). However, in the Hebrew version, the word for 'man' translates to 'Adam'. So the

sentence would read: 'And God created Adam in His own image [...] male and female created He them'. Adam remains the only character, even as we turn to the second narrative, in Genesis 2. There, Adam is placed by God in the garden of Eden, and again this is lost in the English translation: 'The Lord God took the man [or, in the Hebrew version, Adam] and put him into the garden of Eden to till it and care for it' (Genesis 2: 15). Adam remains Adam until the moment woman – or Isha – was created from his rib: and the man said: 'Now this, at last – bone from my bones, flesh of my flesh! – this shall be called Woman [Isha], for from Man [Ish] was this taken' (Genesis 2: 23). It is worth noting here that the Hebrew spelling of Ish [אִישׁ] and Isha [אִשָּׁה] are very similar. The primary difference is the addition of the letter ה to אִשָּׁה [man] making the word אִשָּׁה [woman]. The letter ה is of particular significance in Judaism, as it is commonly used in place of one of the more common and holy names of God – the *Tetragrammaton*.

- 11 These two stories of creation are fascinating with much written about them. Jewish mysticism proposes that the first woman was Lilith, who was banned from Paradise because Adam found her too dominant. In particular, Lilith preferred to be on top during sex; Adam struggled with this, and so God banished her. Scorned Lilith subsequently went on to become mother of demons and is one of the more fascinating characters in Jewish mythology.
- 12 Here, the term 'man-woman' denotes the creation of man and woman as equals. They were created together, not one after the other.
- 13 Because Isha is a Hebrew word, it can be written in English as Isha or Ishah as the final 'h' is silent. For the most part, the common translation is Isha, and this is the one I use throughout this chapter. That said, when quoting directly from Derrida's text I maintain fidelity to his spelling of the word. The variation on spelling does not influence the meaning.
- 14 We see this emphasis on names in *Writing and Difference* (2001b: 70) too, where Derrida argues that naming simultaneously gives existence and withdraws it.
- 15 Later on in *Circumfession* Derrida reveals to us the origin of his 'secret name'; an origin story that was revealed to him on 23 February 1990 (Derrida 1993: 182). We learn that Derrida was named Elie after his uncle, who 'held me in his arms the day of my circumcision' (Derrida 1993: 185), and that this uncle was named in memory of his uncle, 'the brother of my grandfather Abraham, called Elie' who brought shame on the family: 'no one ever mentioned again in the family from the day he abandoned his wife and children to make a new life for himself in mainland France' (Derrida 1993: 185–186).
- 16 It is worth noting here that Derrida's secret name, Elie, is short for Elijah, who is the patron of circumcision.
- 17 It seems crucial to note here that Derrida cautions against attributing words to animals, cautions against anthropo-theomorphic reappropriation, cautions about assigning the cat words it has no need for, and over-interpreting what the cat might be saying. By way of clarification, what does anthropo-theomorphic mean? 'Anthropomorphic' means to ascribe human attributes to something non-human such as god or animal, while 'Theomorphic' means to form in the likeness of God. To anthropomorphise – to attribute human behaviours and characteristics non-humans – is to see the human as the basis, the centre to which all else is compared. Thus by using a term such as 'anthropo-theomorphic' Derrida attempts to *decentre* the human. To attribute the animal with human attributes is to not recognise the animal in its non-human Other, but is instead an attempt to recast the animal as somehow having human behaviour. The risk here is that all categories of 'animal' are erased as we deny the multiplicity of animal species by collating them into one

category, 'Animal', which exists in opposition to the 'Human'. The 'animal' is a meaningless generalisation, Derrida argues (2004: 399). In short, Derrida's use of 'anthropo-theomorphic reappropriation' is an attempt to problematise the human/animal binary. It is of course interesting to note that in the term anthropo-theomorphic, we have the attribution of human characteristics on one side and on the other, creating in God's likeness.

- 18 As an aside, it is understood that the name of Derrida's little cat is *Logos*.
- 19 *The Gift of Death* (2007c [1991]) is one of Derrida's more sustained works on religion, faith, and responsibility. It considers the relation between sacrifice and mortality. The discussion here is focused on the chapter titled 'Tout autre est tout autre' (translated as 'every other is wholly other'), where Derrida addresses the story of Abraham and Isaac in response to Kierkegaard's treatment of the story in *Fear and Trembling* (1986).
- 20 The episode is most frequently conceptualised as an issue of faith in the will of God versus mistrust in the will of God.
- 21 There is an interesting commentary on this sentence in *Genesis Rabbah* (*Genesis Rabbah* is a compilation of exegesis on the book of *Genesis* by rabbis and sages), which I note by way of anecdote: And he said: Take now thy son – 'which one?' 'Thine only son'. 'Each is the only one of his mother?' 'Whom thou lovest'. 'I love them both: are there limits to one's emotions?' Said He to him: 'Even Isaac'. God demands that Abraham choose between both his sons and even goes far as to specify: 'the one you love'. This, Derrida argues in an interview with Yvonne Sherwood, Kevin Hart and John D. Caputo entitled *Epoché and Faith* (2005) is a terrible demand – even before the sacrifice in Mount Moriah Abraham is expected to choose between two equally loved sons (2005: 34–35).
- 22 I elaborate on the nature of this covenant in [Chapter 3](#).
- 23 A brief pause on Derrida's French phrasing. We can also read Derrida's words regarding God's 'gaze': '*ce regard qui me regarde*', as follows: that look [regard] becomes my concern [regarde]. But also, what I watch – what *I regard* – is my concern, it *matters* to me. Here is where accountability comes into play: what I regard is my regard, that is, for what I see, I am accountable. In seeing you, I am responsible for you.
- 24 Etymologically, 'violence' is derived from the Latin *violentia*, which means vehemence and impetuosity. These words have a strong association with 'forcefulness' and 'intensity', but also 'spiritedness' and 'passion'. Violence is not stagnant, sterile, or still. It is in motion, and it calls into motion. Recall Sofsky's argument that rituals are transformative. As we will see in subsequent chapters, I argue that violence can be transformative, too.

Morality, Violence, and Ritual Circumcision

Writing with Blood

Na'ama Carlin

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