



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Derrida at the Limit: Liminality, Alterity, and Ethics in On Touching- Jean-Luc Nancy**

Ton, Wouter

### **Citation**

Ton, W. (2022). *Derrida at the Limit: Liminality, Alterity, and Ethics in On Touching-Jean-Luc Nancy*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master thesis in the Leiden University Student Repository](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3449037>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

MA Thesis Modern European Philosophy, Leiden University

# Derrida at the Limit:

Liminality, Alterity, and Ethics in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*

Student: Wouter H. Ton (s1536346)  
Master: Modern European Philosophy, Leiden University  
Supervisor: Dr. R. Uljée  
Date: 03-07-2022

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. <i>On Touching–Jean-Luc Nancy</i> .....	6
1.0 Introduction.....	6
1.1 Edmund Husserl and Self-Relation .....	7
1.2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Relation to the Other .....	10
1.3 Jean-Luc Nancy and the Limit.....	15
1.4 Conclusion .....	20
2. Deconstruction and Touch .....	22
2.0 Introduction.....	22
2.1 Haunting .....	23
2.2 Deconstruction and Différance .....	24
2.3 Tact/Skin/Limit as Différance .....	26
2.4 Derrida and Ethics .....	28
2.5 Conclusion .....	35
Conclusion .....	35
References.....	38

## Introduction

Jacques Derrida's 2005 book *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, discusses the theme of touching in the history of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> In the book, Derrida argues that in philosophy, touching has historically enjoyed a privilege over the other senses. He names this privilege of touch, 'haptocentrism.' In *On Touching*, many thinkers and their haptocentric work are discussed. The origin of haptocentrism supposedly lies with the Ancient Greeks. Aristotle's *Peri psyches* (Aristoteles' Psychology) would have a lasting effect on the history of the philosophy of touch. According to Aristotle, touch specifically distinguishes multiple characteristics in the world of objects, whereas the other senses only sense one characteristic, sound for hearing for example.<sup>2</sup> Here we can see that for Aristotle already touch has a unique status among the other senses. Jumping ahead to modernity, haptocentrism was also present in Kant. For Kant there are five senses, of which touch is the only one capable of immediate external perception.<sup>3</sup> This capability, located in the hands, is for Kant the most important capability. Kant argues that humans are the only species that, through touching, make the world around them and form concepts of the objects in the world.<sup>4 5</sup>

The extensive discussion of haptocentrism in different thinkers in *On Touching* tends to come across as just a summation of all haptocentric thinkers in the history of the philosophy of touch. In the book it is not entirely clear what makes haptocentrism problematic for Derrida. He makes a few comments questioning whether touching can even be so strictly delineated from the other senses, but these comments are few and leave open the question of what is so harmful about philosophy being haptocentric.

In this thesis I argue that the importance in *On Touching* lies in Derrida's need for liminality in the philosophy of touch in order to ensure the alterity of the other. The alterity of the other in turn is important because Derrida's ethics, politics, and justice, cannot be thought without a respect for the alterity of the other. I furthermore argue that the importance of ethics in a book about touching shows how Derrida's deconstruction is always already a thinking of the ethical and political, therefore arguing against the alleged political and ethical turn in Derrida's thought.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive overview of haptocentrism in the history of philosophy, I refer the reader to the book *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* itself.

<sup>6</sup> It has been argued that Derrida turned towards writing about ethics and politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Derrida denies the existence of such a turn. This will be further discussed in chapter two.

The academic debate regarding the central theme is divided. It has been argued that in *On Touching* time is central for Derrida.<sup>7</sup> The hand has also been argued to be most important.<sup>8</sup> Or it is exteriority which plays the central role.<sup>9</sup> There has also been the suggested solution of there being multiple equivalent hypotheses at work.<sup>10</sup> I argue these themes are interrelated. The themes of time, the impossibility to touch upon touch, and exteriority are all connected. They all revolve around the introduction of the limit into the philosophy of touching, which ensures alterity of the other, which is what I argue in this thesis is Derrida's core motivation in *On Touching*. Exteriority is another way of describing alterity. The argument that Derrida is anti-presentist also plays a role, given that the alterity that Derrida describes is never present. The hand is also important, because of its function within touching and the importance of Edmund Husserl's hand touching the hand in phenomenology and within *On Touching*. All these factors and themes will be more extensively explained throughout this thesis. However, none of the commentators strike at the core of the motivation for *On Touching*. They do not touch upon why liminality and alterity of the other are so important for Derrida, which I argue is the ethical consideration.

The first chapter of this thesis features a reading of *On Touching* and of secondary literature dealing with the book, which will lead to the conclusions mentioned above, namely that Derrida is concerned over a lack of liminality and alterity in the philosophy of touch. Establishing that Derrida is concerned over this lack is an important step towards showing why it matters for Derrida. The importance of liminality and alterity for Derrida I will show, through a discussion of the sections on Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Nancy. Phenomenologists Husserl and Merleau-Ponty represent the problem, and Nancy the solution. What is problematic is the assumed unmediated access to the self in Husserl, and to the other in Merleau-Ponty, which is due to a neglect of alterity in thinking touching. Phenomenology, starting with aforementioned Edmund Husserl, claims we should look at factors such as value and meaning through the lens of the lived experience. The phenomenological strategy to gaining knowledge of how we perceive and experience the phenomena around us, is the bracketing away of the outside, so that all that remains is a description of the contents of our consciousness.<sup>11</sup> What is problematic about this phenomenological methodology for Derrida, is that what is outside of us, alterity, can now only be described as how it appears to us. This is an

---

<sup>7</sup> Jack Reynolds, "Touched by Time: Some Critical Reflections on Derrida's Engagement with Merleau-Ponty in *Le Toucher*," *Sophia* 47, no. 3 (2008): 311–25, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-008-0070-7>.

<sup>8</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "Touching Derrida Touching Nancy: The Main Traits of Derrida's Hand," *Derrida Today* 1, no. 2 (2008): 145–66, <https://doi.org/10.3366/e1754850008000201>.

<sup>9</sup> Donald A Landes, "'Le Toucher' and the 'Corpus' of Tact: Exploring Touch and Technicity with Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy," *L'Esprit Créateur* 47, no. 3 (2007): 80–92, <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2007.0052>.

<sup>10</sup> Ian James, "Haptocentrism," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 138 (2006): 47–49.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Reynolds, "The Other of Derridean Deconstruction: Levinas, Phenomenology and the Question of Responsibility," *Minerva: An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. January 2001 (2001): 32–33, <http://www.mic.ul.ie/stephen/derrida.pdf>.

internalization and an appropriation of alterity. Alterity regards that which is outside the self, or otherness.<sup>12</sup> The risk is that alterity gets collapsed into the self.<sup>13</sup>

Nancy's introduction to the limit is the solution which at the same time functions as a signpost pointing to the problem. It points to what really is problematic for Derrida, which starts with the lack of a limit, and ends with a dissolving of self and other. Nancy is extensively discussed in the book, which is unsurprising considering the title. The importance for Derrida in Nancy is Nancy trying to break away from the haptocentric tradition. He does not succeed completely, but the attempt can help us move forward. What Derrida needs is a philosophy in which alterity is fully considered and not appropriated into the conception of the self, a philosophy in which the other and the self are not collapsed into each other in a field of sameness. However, the work is not finished with Nancy, because Nancy resorts back to a limitlessness in touching, therefore not completely breaking away from haptocentrism and therefore risking the same neglect of alterity and assumption of sameness. Because the work was not finished, Derrida had to carry it on in *On Touching*, theorizing the liminality in touching through a deconstruction of the philosophy of touching, in order to show that alterity is a factor that needs to be accounted for in touching.

In chapter two I show why alterity of the other is important for Derrida. An analysis of the book framed within Derrida's broader deconstructive method will place *On Touching* within Derrida's broader oeuvre, in order to argue that the book, even though its central theme is touching, is a book informed by Derrida's ethics. A lack of liminality and alterity in the philosophy of touching is why for Derrida haptocentrism is wrong. By alterity is meant that which is outside the self, outside of identity. Alterity is an essential concept for Derrida's ethics, hence its importance.

It will be explained how the term 'haunting' came to be and how the term has become a useful tool for Derrida for insisting on alterity. In *On Touching* this happens through the speaking of the haunting of the self by the other, which makes impossible a self without outside influence. An overview of the deconstructive strategy will be given in order to explain how deconstruction happens in *On Touching*. It will be argued that tact, the skin, and the limit are *différance*, because they are what makes the concept of touching possible in the first place, and because they occupy the space between the two points that touch. They are between the two points of opposition, the way *différance* is the third option that results from the overturning and dissolving of the Platonic oppositions in the history of philosophy. I will argue that *différance* is itself a liminal concept, considering its occupation between two points, being neither and both at the same time. The

---

<sup>12</sup> Arkady Plotnitsky, "Différential Atopologies, Mathematical and Ethico-Political: Light, Space, and Alterity in Derrida," *The European Legacy, toward New Paradigms* 12, no. 4 (2007): 449, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770701396288>.

<sup>13</sup> Reynolds, "The Other of Derridean Deconstruction," 35.

importance of tracing *différance* in *On Touching* lies in the fact that for Derrida thinking *différance* and deconstruction is always a thinking of ethics and politics. Therefore, the tracing of *différance* in *On Touching* is a tracing of the underlying motives of the book.

The last section in chapter two will discuss why the alterity of the other matters for Derrida's thinking of ethics, the political, and justice. I will explain this through a reading of *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* and *Specters of Marx*.<sup>14</sup> The idea of respect for the Other was inspired by Emmanuel Levinas' conception of the Other. Derrida's responsibility for the other is not a straightforward general ethical program, rather its crux is in the double bind between responsibility for the singular other versus for the general other.<sup>15</sup> With every decision you never know by whom you are making right and by whom you are making a mistake, therefore we always have to make a sort of leap of faith when deciding.<sup>16</sup> This thinking of ethics needs the alterity of the other. The ethico-political for Derrida cannot be thought without alterity.<sup>17</sup> Derrida's thought is "...a thinking of alterity, of openness to the other."<sup>18</sup>

## 1. *On Touching*—Jean-Luc Nancy

### 1.0 Introduction

In the book *On Touching*, Jacques Derrida argues that the history of philosophy is haptocentric. This means that there is a privileging of touch over the other senses in the history of philosophy. Hence the term haptocentrism, from the Greek *ἅπτω* (*hapto*), which means touch.<sup>19</sup> Many thinkers and their haptocentrism are discussed in the book.

This chapter discusses Derrida's critique of three thinkers who are central in *On Touching*. These thinkers are Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Luc Nancy. The combination of Derrida's discussion of these three thinkers makes clear Derrida's problem with and solution to the problem of haptocentrism. The problem, which is a lack of liminality and alterity in the philosophy of touch, is mostly located in the critique on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The solution,

---

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Meridian (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999); Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Reynolds, 35-39.

<sup>16</sup> "Derrida, Jacques | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy," accessed June 7, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/jacques-derrida/>.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Watkin, "A Different Alterity: Jean-Luc Nancy's 'Singular Plural,'" *Paragraph (Modern Critical Theory Group)* 30, no. 2 (2007): 50–64, <https://doi.org/10.3366/prg.2007.0026>; Plotnitsky, "Différential Atopologies, Mathematical and Ethico-Political: Light, Space, and Alterity in Derrida," 448.

<sup>18</sup> John D. Caputo, "The Good News about Alterity," in *The Essential Caputo* (Indiana University Press, 2018), 231.

<sup>19</sup> "ἅπτω | Billmounce.Com," accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/hapto>.

which is the introduction of liminality in the philosophy of touch, can be found in the sections on Nancy. There is a lack of consideration of alterity in both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of touch. What is needed is an interruption, or a limit, in the conception of touch. This is where Nancy will come in, with his introduction of this liminality in the philosophy of touch. The establishment of the problem and solution are a necessary step towards showing why the problem is significant for Derrida, which is what I will explain in chapter two.

What follows now is a discussion of Derrida's critique on Husserl, in which it will be pointed out how the privilege of touch in Husserl is manifested in his assumption of unmediated or limitless self-relation through self-touching. A conception of a proper self is assumed, free from alterity of the other, which Derrida considers impossible and problematic. Afterwards, I will show how for Derrida touch in Merleau-Ponty is privileged because of the assumed unmediated or limitless access to the other, free from influence of the self. After that, the importance of the limit in Jean-Luc Nancy will be shown. The limit is what is missing in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The critique on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as well as the discussion on Nancy need to be established in order to place *On Touching* in the context of Derrida's broader philosophy in chapter two, where it will be shown why a lack of alterity of the other is problematic for Derrida. The reason is its essentiality for his thinking of the ethical, which is what will be set out in chapter two.

### 1.1 Edmund Husserl and Self-Relation

Husserl is the founder of the phenomenological movement. Derrida's critique on Husserl in *On Touching* is extensive, and it is where in *On Touching* it becomes clear what Derrida finds problematic about haptocentrism. The problematic is a lack of a limit and therefore a lack of alterity in the philosophy of touch. This section discusses how with Husserl this manifests itself in a lack of a limit in self-relation through self-touching. This leads to a conception of the self into which the other is not respected but appropriated. I will now discuss Derrida's critique on Husserl—including some of Husserl's sections which Derrida quotes—which consists in Derrida claiming the impossibility of unmediated self-access and self-touching which Husserl claims are possible.

Derrida argues that, touch plays a central role in Husserl's phenomenology. Edmund Husserl talks about the hand extensively, often using it as an example to prove a point.<sup>20</sup> For Husserl, the hand is

---

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 159.



what enables the body to become the body proper. It does so through the double apprehension of the finger touching the finger. Here is the passage in *Ideas II* Derrida is referring to:<sup>21</sup>

In the tactual realm we have *the external Object*, tactually constituted, and a second Object, the *Body [le corps propre]*, likewise tactually constituted, for example, the touching finger (*etwa den tastenden Finger*), and, in addition, there are fingers touching fingers (*Finger, den Finger tastent*). So here we have the double apprehension: the same touch-sensation is apprehended as a feature of the “external” Object and is apprehended as a sensation of the Body as Object (*des Leib-Objekts*) [*de l’objet-corps propre*]. And in the case in which a part of the Body [*du corps propre*] becomes equally an external Object of an other part [*pour une autre partie du même corps*], we have the double sensation (each part has its own sensation) and the double apprehension as feature of the one or of the other Bodily part as a physical object.<sup>22</sup>

Touch here has a unique status amongst the other senses. Touch is the experience of presence for Husserl. Derrida follows Husserl up to this point, but questions Husserl’s conclusion that touch must then also always be intuitive and immediate.<sup>23</sup> For Husserl intuitive means knowledge that is immediately given to us.<sup>24</sup> Through touch we have immediate access to the world and to ourselves. The privilege of the finger in Husserl is that it can both touch and be touched, establishing unmediated self-relation. Why does vision not grant the same self-relation that touch does? After all, is it not possible to see yourself? When you look into a mirror you can see your own eyes, the way you can touch your own fingers. But Husserl argues you do not actually see your own eyes, rather you see the reflection of your eyes and empathetically tell yourself that it is your eye that you are seeing when it is not. It is just the reflection of your eyes.<sup>25</sup> The eye cannot touch, this much is true, but is seeing really that different from touching? For Husserl the difference lies in the self-relation of touch that sight does not achieve, which is immediate and spontaneous, without the assistance of the technology of the mirror.<sup>26</sup> Derrida questions this:

---

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy Volume II: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 160-162.

<sup>24</sup> Jaakko Hintikka, “The Notion of Intuition in Husserl,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 57, no. 224 (2) (2003): 169–91.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 170.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 171-178.

I ask whether there is any pure auto-affection of the touch-touching or the touched, and therefore any pure, immediate experience of the purely proper body, the body proper that is living, purely living. Or if, on the contrary, this experience is at least not already *haunted*, but *constitutively* haunted, by some hetero-affection related to spacing and then to visible spatiality—where an intruder maybe come through, a host, wished or unwished for, a spare and auxiliary other, or a parasite to be rejected, a *pharmakon* that already having at its disposal a dwelling in this place inhabits one's hearts of hearts as a ghost.<sup>27 28</sup>

Here we can see Derrida's pointing to the impossibility of an unmediated self-relation, purely self without any influence of any other. Husserl assumes there is a realm inside us that we can access before influence of the outside, of the other, a place of relation to the self where the existence of the other is not known, unnoticed, before any awareness we have of the existence of others. Derrida has doubts about this possibility. For him there is no single auto-affection that is immediate and intuitive, rather there are multiple auto-affections that are already affected. By auto-affection Derrida means experience of selfness and experience of sameness. Derrida argues that auto-affections are impossible and are really hetero-affections, thus marking difference instead of sameness in experience of the self.<sup>29</sup> The difference is constituted by the alterity of the other. There is not just the same self, there is also always already the haunting of the other which cannot be bracketed away.

The supposed auto-affections are not purely immediate and intuitive, and therefore not auto- but hetero-affections. They are already *haunted* by the singular and general other which cannot be appropriated into the self. The singular other refers to specific others you encounter, have encountered, and will encounter. The general other refers to otherness in general, or the whole of other.<sup>30</sup> The self always is always already influenced by the alterity of the other, which that a conception of the self, free from this alterity, cannot be established by the subject. The other affects the self-relation and the conception of the self, interrupting it by haunting it. That does not mean that the other is always present in the relation to the self, but they are not absent either. Rather they are somewhere between present and absent, which is the haunting to which Derrida refers.<sup>31</sup> This theme of a haunting between presence and absence will be further explained and framed within

---

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 179-180.

<sup>28</sup> The *Pharmakon* is a word in the chain of *Différance* which plays the central role in Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy*. It is neither poison nor remedy, and at the same time both poison and remedy. *Pharmakon*, *Différance*, and the project of deconstruction more generally will be discussed more in depth in chapter three.

<sup>29</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2014), 130-138.

<sup>30</sup> The distinction between the two will return in chapter two when the double bind between responsibility for the singular and general other will be explained.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 179-180.

Derrida's general deconstructive method in chapter two, in order to show the relationship between *On Touching* and ethics, given that haunting plays a role in both.<sup>32</sup>

Husserl's immediate access to the self implies a conception of the self, which is free from the influence of the other. This is problematic for Derrida, because the haunting of the alterity of the other cannot be escaped. The other cannot be reduced to an element of the consciousness of the self since they cannot fully be grasped. The haunting also cannot be bracketed away.

What Husserl does not view as possible is a relation to the other in the way one relates to the self. For Husserl, there can never be any unmediated, direct contact with the other. The other is interpreted by us through empathy and projection. He explains:

We do not attain the givenness of our self as a spatial thing like all others (a givenness which certainly is manifest in our factual experience) nor that of the natural Object, 'man' (animal being), which we came to know as a correlate of the 'naturalistic attitude,' a material thing upon which the higher strata of what is specifically animal are built and into which they are, in a certain way, inserted, 'introjected' (*'intojiziert' sind*).<sup>33</sup>

Simply put, we imagine what it would be like for us to be in the situation the other is in and empathize. This is not the same as completely grasping the other.

In the interpretation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty knowing the other becomes possible, which means that in his thinking there is, besides a lack of alterity in self-relation, also a lack of alterity in relation to the other, a relation in which there was alterity for Husserl. The risk for Derrida is that the conception of both self and the other become intertwined and reduced to sameness. I will now discuss this consequence and its cause according to Derrida in the following section.

## 1.2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Relation to the Other

This section concerns a discussion of Derrida's treatment of Merleau-Ponty's touching. For Derrida, the problem of unmediated access and the absence of a limit is also present in Merleau-Ponty, who extends the privilege of touch to also include unmediated access to the other, implying the of sameness of the self and the other, free from alterity. As stated before, homogeneity and an appropriation of the other are what Derrida warns against, due to the ethical implications which will be further set out in chapter two.

---

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 182.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 176.

Derrida's critique of Merleau-Ponty was the most controversial one in the book, when considering the reaction it incited amongst different commentators. After having established Derrida's critique of Merleau-Ponty, a discussion of these authors will follow. The aim of this discussion is to show how Merleau-Ponty might not have been haptocentric in some of his work, however that does not take away from the haptocentrism in the Merleau-Ponty sections that Derrida does discuss. Another aim is to show how these authors do not pay attention to the ethical implications in Merleau-Ponty's haptocentrism, which is I argue is central for Derrida.

Derrida's discussion of Merleau-Ponty, when taken together with his discussion of Husserl, point to the importance of a solution in order to safeguard the other and to ensure its alterity, which will be found in the thought of Nancy, with the introduction of liminality.

For Merleau-Ponty it is in fact possible to immediately access the other. Contact with the other is possible, the same way I have access to myself. Derrida draws this conclusion from the following Merleau-Ponty passage from *Signs*:<sup>34</sup>

My right hand *was present* [assistait] at the advent of my left hand's active sense of touch. *It is in no different fashion* that the other's body becomes animate before me when I shake another man's hand or just look at him [Husserl, *Ideas II*, pp. 173-174]. In learning that my body is a "perceiving thing," that is able to be stimulated [*reizbar*]-it, and not just my "consciousness"-I prepared myself for understanding that there are other *animalia* and possibly other men.

*It is imperative to recognize that we have here neither comparison, nor analogy, nor projection or "introjection"* [ohne Introjektion (ibid., p. 175)]. The reason why I have evidence of the other man's being-there when I shake his hand is that his hand is substituted for my left hand...<sup>35</sup>

With Husserl there is always a distance between me and the other, and also a different kind of access between the one I have to myself and the one I have to the other. The other is only accessible through introjection, and the relation of the other to themselves will never be accessible to me.<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl is therefore radically different from what Husserl wanted to say, according to Derrida.<sup>37</sup> Derrida warns against Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl, saying that:

---

<sup>34</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, book, trans. Richard C. McCleary, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 190.

<sup>36</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas II*, 176-177.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 189-191.

One runs the risk of reconstituting an intuitionism of immediate access to the other, as originary as my access to my own most properly proper—and in one blow, doing without appresentation, indirection, *Einfühlung*, one also runs the risk of *reappropriating* the alterity of the other more surely, more blindly, or even more violently than ever. In this respect Husserl's cautious approach will always remain *before us* as a model of vigilance. It is necessary to watch over the other's alterity: it will always remain inaccessible to an originally presentive intuition, an immediate and direct presentation of the *here*.<sup>38</sup>

Husserl here gets praised for being cautious of not appropriating the other's alterity when thinking about the relation to the other. It is important for Derrida to insist on the otherness of the other, and on the inseparable bridge between me and the other, which constitutes a limit. The risk in not doing so is an appropriation of the other into the self.

In Merleau-Ponty's thought there is no limit and therefore no alterity of the other, according to Derrida. Merleau-Ponty, in *Signs*, argues that we all are part of a world without distance between those that interact:

On the other hand, I know unquestionably that that man over there *sees*, that my sensible world is also his, because *I am present at his seeing*, it is *visible* [*se voit*] in his eyes' grasp of the scene. And when I say I see *that* he sees, there is no longer here (as there is in "I think that he thinks") the interlocking of two propositions but the mutual unfocusing of a "main" and a "subordinate" viewing.<sup>39</sup>

Derrida disagrees with this dissolving of the here and there:

When I take into account a whole history, from hominization to socialization connected to the verbal language and its pragmatic conditions, and so forth, I can convey to "every man's" ear that the world of each person is untranslatable and that finally there will never be any "same world."<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 191.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 196.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 193-194.

My world is not the same as yours, and it can never be. Derrida sides with Husserl in saying that there is a distance between me and the other, and that we can never have the same world and the exact same language.<sup>41</sup>

Derrida himself argues that the senses are not as strictly separated as some assume, and that really, we could not even count the senses if we wanted to. By this he means that there is no clear-cut distinction between the senses. Therefore, it is no use to even talk about a hierarchy in the sensuous.<sup>42</sup> However, that is not the central problem for Derrida. After Husserl's neglect of the alterity of the other in self-relation, Merleau-Ponty neglects extends to the alterity to the relation of the subject with the other. A relation to the other is envisioned, performed by the subject, in which there is no distance between the subject and the other, constituted by presence of the self.<sup>43</sup> The risk is a sublation of the self and the other into sameness. This is problematic for Derrida, who wants to insist on hetero-affection instead of auto-affection, on difference due to alterity rather than sameness due to an absence of mediation.

Now that Derrida's critique of Merleau-Ponty has been set out, I will move to a discussion of the debate on this critique, which led to more reaction than did his critique of other thinkers in *On Touching*. Some feel Derrida is unfair in his reading of Merleau-Ponty whereas others agree with Derrida's point.<sup>44</sup> April Flakne argues that Derrida does not consider the late Merleau-Ponty extensively enough.<sup>45</sup> She does concede that Husserl's appresentation and empathy are absent in Merleau-Ponty but argues that there is synaesthesia and what she calls choreography to replace these factors. In interaction, all the parts perform an improvised choreography, in which interaction is not intuited but room for distance and alterity remains.<sup>46</sup> What is meant by parts include people, their body parts, and the environment, among others.

Jack Reynolds argues that Derrida's problem with Merleau-Ponty, and the supposedly haptocentric philosophy of touch revolves around the concept of time.<sup>47</sup> Derrida thinks of Merleau-Ponty as presentist, whereas Derrida is anti-presentist. Reynolds argues that Derrida comes to these

---

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 193-194.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 204.

<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 191-194.

<sup>44</sup> April Flakne, "Contact/Improv: A Synaesthetic Rejoinder To Derrida's Reading of Merleau-Ponty," *Refuguring Continental Philosophy* 32 (2007): 42-49; Jack Reynolds, "Touched by Time: Some Critical Reflections on Derrida's Engagement with Merleau-Ponty in *Le Toucher*," *Sophia* 47, no. 3 (2008): 311-25, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-008-0070-7>; Héctor G Castaño, "A Worldless Flesh: Derrida, Merleau-Ponty and the Body in Transcultural Perspective," *Parallax (Leeds, England)* 25, no. 1 (2019): 42-57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2019.1570605>; Tim Herrick, "'A Book Which Is No Longer Discussed Today': Tran Duc Thao, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66, no. 1 (2005): 113-31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2005.0027>.

<sup>45</sup> Flakne, "Contact/Improv: A Synaesthetic Rejoinder To Derrida's Reading of Merleau-Ponty."

<sup>46</sup> Flakne, 43-48.

<sup>47</sup> Reynolds, "Touched by Time: Some Critical Reflections on Derrida's Engagement with Merleau-Ponty in *Le Toucher*," 2008.

conclusions by taking the Merleau-Ponty passages out of context. According to Reynolds, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does not revolve around touching and the hand as much as Derrida accuses him to be, nor is his philosophy presentist. Derrida should have been more generous to Merleau-Ponty and should have given more credit to empirical evidence in order to see where Merleau-Ponty was right.<sup>48</sup>

Tim Herrick agrees with Reynolds and Flakne in arguing that Derrida does not give enough credit to Merleau-Ponty and claims that this is due to biographical reasons. Derrida supposedly considered himself an outsider in French philosophy, and he therefore could not possibly subscribe to such a 'mainstream' French thinker such as Merleau-Ponty.<sup>49</sup> This is an interesting explanation which might potentially hold some truth, but it might not hold up given that a wide range of thinkers are criticized in the book, a lot of them not French, and some of them not that 'mainstream.'

Michael Naas recognizes a lack of consideration of some of Merleau-Ponty's work but has a different explanation for it. He suggests that when Derrida speaks of "a certain Merleau-Ponty," he means that he is referring to specific work by Merleau-Ponty, which could explain why there is no mention of certain other works by Merleau-Ponty. Many authors have faulted Derrida for paying attention to some passages and chapters in Merleau-Ponty whilst ignoring others.<sup>50</sup> Naas' explanation hints at intentionality on the part of Derrida, who might have seen a certain Merleau-Ponty as fitting within the tradition, whereas a different Merleau-Ponty could have differed from said tradition. The problem I see in this line of reasoning is that if Derrida had considered a Merleau-Ponty which broke with the haptocentric tradition, why does not mention this Merleau-Ponty along with Nancy, as a 20<sup>th</sup> century figures who stray from the haptocentric tradition.

Several authors have jumped to Merleau-Ponty's defense in different ways. Flakne's improvised choreography, Reynolds claim that Merleau-Ponty is not presentist, and Herrick biographical framing of Derrida are interesting theories which might or might not hold some truth. The aim of this thesis is not to falsify these claims. What I argue is that they do not consider why Merleau-Ponty is important for Derrida in *On Touching*, which is because Merleau-Ponty exemplifies a lack of liminality and therefore alterity for Derrida. Again, this alterity is necessary for Derrida in thinking his ethics, which is what these authors do not consider.<sup>51</sup>

Regarding the accusations at Derrida's address of nitpicking certain sections in Merleau-Ponty, I argue that for Derrida this would not take away from the fact that the sections discussed do show haptocentrism and a lack of alterity of the other. In deconstruction, the text points to what was

---

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds, 314-324.

<sup>49</sup> Tim Herrick, "A Book Which Is No Longer Discussed Today," 113-31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2005.0027>.

<sup>50</sup> Naas, 263.

<sup>51</sup> Chapter two explains this necessity.

covered over, which in this case was alterity. There were traces pointing to this covering over in the sections of the texts discussed by Derrida. Whether or not other sections argue something different does not change that.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, this thesis focuses on Naas' "certain Merleau-Ponty" which Derrida discusses, who Derrida considers belonging to the haptocentric tradition of touch. I argue that the importance for Derrida in these sections has not been emphasized by the authors above, which is Derrida's ethical need for alterity of the other.

Derrida argues we need something new to question all this persistent haptocentric talking of touch in philosophy.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the book, Derrida keeps emphasizing the importance of Nancy's thinking of self-touching, and how it establishes a limit. The limit in touching is important for Derrida. Nancy's introduction of the limit in the philosophy of touching is central. This is due to the fact that liminality is a concept that is not present in the tradition of the philosophy of touch, with the consequence that immediate access to the self (Husserl) and the other (Merleau-Ponty) are assumed. The next section discusses the introduction of liminality in the philosophy of touch by Jean-Luc Nancy.

### 1.3 Jean-Luc Nancy and the Limit

This section shows Derrida's insistence on the liminality in the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy. The aim is to show why the absence of a limit in touching in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is problematic, since it results in an assumption of unmediated access to the self and the other, ignoring the alterity of the other. The importance of the alterity of the other will be explained in chapter two. Nancy's importance for Derrida lies in his introduction of liminality into the philosophy of touch, which results in the safeguarding of the alterity of the other, which as we will see is important for Derrida's thinking ethics. A discussion of Nancy and liminality is important because it is the link towards Derrida's thinking of ethics, politics, and justice.

The view on what role Nancy plays, and whether or not this is an important role, is divided. After having discussed Derrida's discussion of Nancy in *On Touching*, I will discuss the academic discussion regarding Nancy's role in the book and claim that it is significant. Its significance again is the introduction of liminality in touching. However, it will be shown that Nancy does not fully manage to do so, returning to a limitlessness in touching. Derrida is thankful to Nancy for introducing the limit, however, wants to further implement it into philosophy so that alterity is no longer neglected.

---

<sup>52</sup> A more extensive discussion of Derrida's deconstruction happens in chapter two.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 265-269.



Derrida presents the problem of self-touching in relation to Nancy's conceptions of mind and body, and Nancy's attempting to connect the two. Psyche is both extended and untouchable, according to Nancy.<sup>54</sup> This means that even though it is only possible to touch that which is extended, not everything that is extended can be touched. With the history of philosophy and primarily in Descartes, body is extended whereas Psyche (thinking) is not. Thinking and extension are thus incommensurable.<sup>55</sup> The bridging of the gap between the two, Nancy finds in the mouth. It is the opening between the two. The function of the mouth to being the opening and non-opening (it can be closed) between mind and body, functioning like a portal of sorts. The mouth opens itself, and as a self-opening, it also spaces itself.<sup>56</sup> In a way it self-touches, which is what is important for Derrida. Self-touching is a problem for Derrida, since self-touching comes with an untouchability of some factors of the self, for example the Psyche or the inner-organs. However, Derrida is not satisfied with the supposed solution of the mouth, and later likens it to the pineal gland for Descartes.<sup>57</sup> To break with the tradition of haptocentrism Derrida wants us to insist on touch and the liminality involved with touch.<sup>58</sup>

Self-touching is not the only touching that comes with a certain untouchability. This also applies to the touching of the other. This is what Derrida calls the law of tact. This law of tact is inspired by Nancy, for whom touching is also always already withdrawing.<sup>59</sup> This law demands that we keep our distance from others, out of respect. There is a sense of untouchability of the other to which we have to conform. We can touch the other but there is a limit which is at the same time touchable and untouchable. There is the literal skin, which functions as a limit, and there is the law of tact, which also functions as a limit. They are both what are touched upon, and at the same time what brings in the element of distance and untouchability.

The limit plays an important role for Derrida. It is the only place where one can really touch, on the skin or on a surface, on that which resists force. When two people touch, it is their outsides touching, they are touching at each other's limits.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, it cannot be touched, it does not let itself be touched, it is at the limit, out of reach. The limit is where separation between two things happens. What is behind the limit is untouchable, and so is the limit itself. It is in this way

---

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 20-26.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 43.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 46.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Jackson, "The Law of Tact," in *Tactile Poetics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 52–59,

<https://doi.org/10.3366/j.ctt16r0jh4.7>.

<sup>60</sup> Sarah Jackson, "The Law of Tact," 59.

touchable and untouchable.<sup>61</sup> Touching on this limit is an important theme for Nancy and therefore for Derrida in *On Touching*.

Derrida's insistence on the limit, in both self-touching and in the touching of the other, which is described as having a sense of untouchability together with the being able to be touched, relates back to what we discussed in terms of Derrida's critique of haptocentrism. The problematic with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty at its core boiled down to a lack of consideration of alterity in the tradition. The limit, which is where touching happens whilst it also is untouchable, is crucial for Derrida, because it makes impossible the unmediated access against which he has been warning.

This limit between me and the other is the law of tact. Complying to a law means touching upon it. Thus "*One is not to touch the law commanding that one not touch.*"<sup>62</sup> Touching in this way touches upon what it does not touch and on what it does touch.<sup>63</sup> Tact is touching without touching, due to the limit. Touching is always situated on a limit or border, for Derrida. The law of tact is Derrida's answer to Merleau-Ponty's unmediated access to the other. Where Merleau-Ponty did not see a limit in the relation between a subject and the other, Derrida wants to insist on this limit, and has named it the law of tact. This law of tact, by constituting the limit between me and the other, makes impossible the unmediated relation to the other to which Derrida objects in Merleau-Ponty. Derrida's answer to Husserl's unmediated self-relation, which neglects the haunting of the alterity of the other, is the skin. Husserl saw the touching the finger by the other finger as an unmediated touching, the same way the self can immediately touch upon the self. Derrida argues against both possibilities by introducing the skin as limit. The skin as limit constitutes an untouchability in self-touching, as well as a mediation. The same goes for Husserl's auto-affection, which really is hetero-affection. The haunting of alterity is the limit which mediates the relation to the self, located in the liminal space between touchable and untouchable.

How does this touching on a limit that cannot be touched work? For Nancy, it happens through the changing sense from sight to touch. This is a sublime act; the limit is touched by the sublime imagination.<sup>64</sup> When touching upon the limit, the imagination realizes that it cannot touch it, and it feels itself to be powerless. In feeling itself, it touches upon itself, touching its own limit (which of course it cannot touch). This is how the imagination encounters its own limit.<sup>65</sup> Derrida argues that

---

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 66-67.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida is aware of the paradoxical language he uses when speaking of touch, but he argues this is the only way to speak about it since touching is paradoxical. I will argue in chapter two that this language is very much in line with Derrida's general method and incorporated language.

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 104-105.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 106.

Nancy's distinction of the five senses is unproductive and shaped by history. The distinction of the five senses and the bias towards touch are unjustified. He explains:

But how is one to justify these "commodities" in view of a science of the body said to be proper and of inanimate bodies, in view of a physiology (physics, biology, neurology, and so forth) that would demonstrate that there is nothing one could rigorously define as "senses," nothing that allows one to count them up to five, and above all nothing that lets one recognize in them each time an identity without contamination, an identity such that the "tradition" thus under suspicion—even when it admits some contamination, cooperation, substitution, and vicariousness—keeps presupposing an identity thus contaminated, remedied, replaced, and so forth?<sup>66</sup>

For Nancy experience itself begins, where the limit is touched. When this limit is touched, the proper is lost, it is interrupted. This interruption is what the touch is in self-touching for Nancy.

*"To present is to make sensible, and sensibility equals the touching of the limit, touching the limit, at the limit."*<sup>67</sup> Derrida wants to find out what Nancy means by this. Derrida argues that a limit implies finitude, and the possibility of interruption. Infinity implies a lack of any limit, a limitlessness. When a limit is introduced this implies finitude. Something is stopped at the limit, interrupted. The privilege of touch and the hand in the history of philosophy entails a need for continuity and indivisibility, over interruption and divisibility. Nancy breaks with this continuity when he introduces the limit, and therefore the interruption.<sup>68</sup> This provided Derrida with the answers to the limitlessness of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

But does Nancy himself really stick to the liminality he claims? Touching the other as touching the self does not have the limit on which Nancy keeps insisting. Derrida explains:

To be sure, touch, as *self-touching*, is touch, but also touch *plus* every other sense (whence the dizziness of the rhetorical turns of phrase). Touch, as *self-touching*, is the being of every being of every sense in general, the being-sense of sense, the condition of possibility of sensibility in general, the very form of space and time, and so forth. But first of all, the will, the essence of the will, and therefore every metaphysics of the will (perhaps for Descartes to

---

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 106-107.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 136.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 155-156.

Kant or even to Nietzsche) will have been brought back to touch. Perhaps reduced to touch: haptico-transcendental reduction.<sup>69</sup>

Nancy's touching is mediated by the skin, but at the same time it is what conditions all sensing for Nancy, it is not a category of sense, it is sense itself. Derrida dubs this thinking of touch as quasi-transcendental.<sup>70</sup> Where Nancy seemed to break away from the tradition by introducing the limit, he did not in the end succeed, returning to a degree of limitlessness in thinking touching. There is a touching in Nancy, which is limitless and unmediated by skin, which is the touching of the heart. The heart is borderless and limitless, and one cannot self-touch the heart, however another can.<sup>71</sup> This would mean that for Nancy self-touching is still a touching of immediacy and interruption, but this touching of the heart can be interpreted by Derrida as a return to limitless and immediate touching. The heart can only be touched by the other, and that specific touching is limitless.

As we have seen Nancy is critiqued but valued by Derrida. Some commentators have argued that Nancy's role in *On Touching* is insignificant and that he is only there for Derrida to critique as just another author who is wrong about touching.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, there are authors who argue the opposite, claiming that Nancy actually plays a central role for Derrida in the book, as a thinker who differs from the haptocentric tradition, introducing liminality.<sup>73</sup>

Martin McQuillan argues that *On Touching* is a book which touches upon touching, but in which Derrida never really gets to theorizing touching.<sup>74</sup> Nor does he feel that Derrida in the book attempts to correct Nancy's theorization of touching, rather he continuously points the finger at Nancy's deconstructive method being faulty, Christian, and returning to metaphysics.

According to Ian James, the history of philosophy is haptocentric, and this history is continued, interrupted, and changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, referring to phenomenology as well as the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>75</sup> The opposition between phenomenology and Nancy is the crux of the book according to James. Whereas phenomenology recognizes immediate auto-affection through touching, Nancy, and Derrida with him, argue for the mediated, interrupted hetero-affection and experience. According to Derrida and Nancy, there is no pre-technical phenomenological body proper, this body is already haunted by the mediacy of technics.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 274.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 275.

<sup>71</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 267.

<sup>72</sup> Martin McQuillan, "Toucher I: (The Problem with Self-Touching)" 1, no. 2 (January 27, 2009): 201–11, <https://doi.org/10.3366/E1754850008000237>; Hillis Miller, "Touching Derrida Touching Nancy: The Main Traits of Derrida's Hand."

<sup>73</sup> Naas, "In and Out of Touch: Derrida's" Le Toucher""; James, "Haptocentrism."

<sup>74</sup> McQuillan, "Toucher I: (The Problem with Self-Touching)."

<sup>75</sup> James. "Haptocentrism."

<sup>76</sup> James, 47.

Landes, Armour, James, and Naas do recognize that Derrida views Nancy as an interruption of the tradition, by providing liminality and therefore alterity.<sup>77</sup> However, I argue that they do not consider why this liminality and alterity are important, beyond claiming that it just is so for Derrida. McQuillan is right in stating that Derrida critiques Nancy, however the critique is not an attack on Nancy and it also does not involve a disregarding Nancy.<sup>78</sup> Derrida certainly critiques Nancy throughout the book, but Nancy's introduction of the limit into the philosophy of touching is very important for Derrida. The critique that is important in the book is that Nancy, according to Derrida, does not fully break with the haptocentric tradition. If Nancy had successfully managed to do so, maybe Derrida would not even have written *On Touching*. Derrida also critiques Nancy's alleged unsuccessful attempts to deconstruct Christianity, but even though this is related to Nancy's conception of touch, it is outside the focus of this thesis.

Furthermore, I agree with Ian James in the importance of the opposition between phenomenology and Nancy in the book.<sup>79</sup> What this thesis adds to this argument is an explanation of how Derrida's discussion of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Nancy functions as the key to Derrida's problem with the haptocentric tradition as well as where philosophy should break with said tradition. As mentioned above, there is also the addition of how the law of tact is an answer to what Derrida sees as problematic in Merleau-Ponty, which is unmediated access to the other and to otherness.

However, because of Nancy's return to a sense of limitlessness, Derrida felt he needed to reconsider Nancy's touching. If someone can touch another's without the limit of either tact or the skin, there would be immediate access to the other. Nancy here risks the same neglect of alterity and appropriation of the other into the self as was seen with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty respectively. Nancy was on the right track by introducing liminality into touching, but he did not properly break with the haptocentric tradition, which is why Derrida has done so in *On Touching*, in order to rebut the neglect of alterity and haptocentrism in philosophy, specifically in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.

## 1.4 Conclusion

In the book *On Touching-Jean-Luc Nancy*, Jacques Derrida warns against haptocentrism. Haptocentrism is a privileging of touch over the other senses. In this chapter it was argued that Derrida's discussion of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Luc Nancy, together point towards the core of Derrida's problem with the haptocentric philosophical tradition. Edmund Husserl

---

<sup>77</sup> Landes, "ESPRIT CREATEUR"; Ellen T. Armour, "Touching Transcendence: Sexual Difference and Sacrality in Derrida's *Le Toucher*," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Kevin Hart and Yvonne Sherwood, 2005, 351–61; James, "Haptocentrism"; Naas, "In and Out of Touch: Derrida's " *Le Toucher*."

<sup>78</sup> McQuillan, "Toucher I: (The Problem with Self-Touching)."

<sup>79</sup> James, "Haptocentrism."

assumes a relation to the self, or an auto-affection, which can be purely self, meaning without outside influence. Derrida argues against this, because this does not account for the haunting of the alterity of the other. Rather than an auto-affection of self and sameness, this really is a hetero-affection which includes otherness and difference.

Derrida's introduction of the law of tact is an answer to what he sees wrong in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, which is a lack of a limit and of alterity in his thinking of relation to the other and to otherness. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, according to Derrida, argues for the possibility of a relating to the other, which is free of any mediation or limitation, exactly the same way in which that other relates to their self. I have argued that Derrida objects to this because a relation to another devoid of the self is impossible for him.

It is Jean-Luc Nancy's introduction of the limit in touching which points to the abovementioned centrality of the critiques of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, who represent the haptocentric tradition as a whole. This limit functions as the place on which touch can happen, and at the same time as a distance which cannot be touched. It is a liminal space between touchable and untouchable, which is neither but also contains elements of both. This haunting of the alterity of the other functions as a limit, as a space between me and the other, which is constituted as a liminal space. Derrida frames this as the law of tact, which is a form of respect which gives distance between me and the other, and which in this way functions as a limit. I have argued that this law of tact is Derrida's response to Merleau-Ponty's immediate relation to the other.

I furthermore claimed that the skin as limit or as liminal space was Derrida's response to Husserl's auto-affection. The skin as liminal space is where touching happens, but also includes an element of untouchability. Because of this, unmediated self-touching is impossible since there is the mediation of the skin. This extends to the way one relates to the self, which is limited by the haunting of the alterity of the other. What that means is that there is no pure relation to the self, free of outside influence, because this relation is always already haunted by alterity, thus making for a hetero-affection including difference and otherness.

The next chapter will explain why the liminality of tact and the skin, and alterity, are so important for Derrida. I will show that it is because of Derrida's considerations of ethics which need the alterity of the other. Contextualizing *On Touching* within Derrida's broader philosophy will be the strategy moving forward towards establishing what makes liminality and alterity of the other important for Derrida.

## 2. Deconstruction and Touch

### 2.0 Introduction

After having established in the previous chapter that Derrida views haptocentrism in the philosophy of touch as problematic, in this chapter I will explain why this is so significant for Derrida. What needs to be done to answer this question is contextualize *On Touching* within Derrida's broader philosophy.

First, I will further explain the term 'haunting' in the context of Derrida's book *Specters of Marx*.<sup>80</sup> It will be shown that haunting is a term that delineates the activity of being neither present nor absent. It is what the specter or the ghost does. The specter and the ghost are, similar to the other, alterior. Haunting in *On Touching* serves the purpose of speaking about this alterity of the other, which haunts the self. Haunting is important because it is a verb that lets Derrida talk of the workings of the alterity of the other in terms of influence on the self, which is significant because of the ethical implications.

Section 2.2 will give a short overview of Derrida's deconstructive strategy more generally and the role of *différance* in deconstruction, in order to put *On Touching* and Derrida's deconstruction of the philosophy of touch in the book in the broader context of deconstruction. The purpose of this is to better understand the purpose of the book, by framing it within the larger motivation behind Derrida's work more generally, which is always an ethical motivation. *Différance* is a central word in Derrida's strategy, therefore it is important to look at *différance* in *On Touching*. It will be argued that tact and skin and the limit in general are *différance* because tact and skin, as limits, make possible the very concept of touch, as well as its impossibility. The possible impossibility of touch, and the untouchable touchability, are terms often used in *On Touching*. I will argue that these are all *différance*. I will furthermore be argued that *différance* itself is a liminal word, since it is always positioned between two poles, being neither the one nor the other while at the same time being both.

Thinking *différance* is thinking ethics and politics, for Derrida.<sup>81</sup> In section 2.4 I will explain the ethical motivations behind *On Touching*. In *On Touching*, Derrida wrote a book proclaiming the need for liminality, and therefore alterity, in the philosophy of touch. I argue the motivation for this proclamation is the role of the alterity of the other in Derrida's ethics. These ethics are inspired by Levinas and involve the double bind between responsibility for the general and the singular other respectively. This double bind also makes impossible a direct derivation of politics from ethics, which makes necessary the leaping into decision-making. The setting out of Derrida's ethics shows why

---

<sup>80</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Meridian (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 39.

alterity is important for Derrida, explaining the significance of alterity in *On Touching*, showing the connection between the book and Derrida's thinking ethics and politics. What can be concluded from the connection between Derrida's extensive discussing of touching and his ethics is that thinking deconstruction and *différance* is indeed always a thinking of ethics and politics, which points towards the nonexistence of a turn towards the topics of ethics and politics.

## 2.1 Haunting

Throughout *On Touching*, reference is being made to the *haunting* of the other or of otherness. This term, haunting, finds its origins in Derrida's 1993 book *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*.<sup>82</sup> In this book, Derrida took inspiration from Marx' communist manifesto, in which "a specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism."<sup>83</sup> According to Derrida, Marx himself took the inspiration from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet is haunted by the ghost of his father (or is he?).<sup>84</sup> In *Specters of Marx*, the world is haunted by the specters of Marx, and of Marxism.<sup>85</sup>

The specter is what haunts. Haunting means that it lingers, that it is always-already there, but without ever being actually present. Haunting is an always-already absent present. It is "...without present reality, without actuality, or effectivity..."<sup>86</sup> speaking of the haunting of concepts is what Derrida calls 'hauntology'. He explains:

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.<sup>87</sup>

Ontology tries to call forth a concept into being, to make present. Hauntology deals with what was already there before the concept, and which continues to haunt the concept. Hauntology is what makes ontology possible in the first place.<sup>88</sup> Ontology is about being and presence. Derrida's

---

<sup>82</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, trans. Robert C. Tucker, Second (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 469–500.

<sup>84</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (The Floating Press, 2009).

<sup>85</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 3, 46.

<sup>86</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 47, 63.

<sup>87</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 202.

<sup>88</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 63.



deconstruction is about moving away from the privilege granted to presence in philosophy, hence the answer of hauntology against ontology. Hauntology is the deconstruction of ontology.<sup>89</sup>

The specter is not an entity whose secrets are to be discovered, rather it can be used as an opening of meaning. It is not something that can be known, rather a tool in the deconstructive process which can help uncover meaning in the concepts that it haunts.<sup>90</sup> What is important for Derrida in the ghost or specter is its otherness. It is always-already there in absent presence, reminding us of difference and of the other. This reminder is important for Derrida because of its ethical implications, which will be set out in section 2.4.<sup>91</sup> In *On Touching*, it is alterity of the other or otherness that takes the place of the specter, as that which haunts. It is the self that is haunted. The haunting is what makes the pure self-relation, or auto-affection free from outside influence, impossible for Derrida. The self is always-already haunted by alterity. Following the logic of hauntology, it must be concluded that alterity of the other is what is already-there before the conception of the self.

I argue that this haunting is another way for Derrida to speak of things that are neither present nor absent, in the form of a word that came to him later on in his career, inspired by Marx' talk of specters. Marx' specters haunt the world, and so does the specter of Marx. Derrida's talking about these specters have given him another tool to speak of otherness, another way to insist on the alterity of the other, as seen in the book *On Touching*. Haunting in this way is another word that helps Derrida describe how alterity works. It is a verb which makes possible speaking of a place between presence and absence, in a way that a verb like 'to be' cannot. Since alterity is neither present nor absent, it would be incorrect to speak of alterity being somewhere. 'To haunt' is a verb that implies neither presence nor absence.

In *On Touching*, it is the haunting of the other that makes possible the very conception of the self, and impossible a conception of the self, free from the other, which is important for Derrida, since thinking ethics cannot be done without the influence of the alterity of the other on the self.

## 2.2 Deconstruction and Différance

Derrida's deconstruction is a philosophical method or strategy inspired by Heidegger's *Destruktion*.<sup>92</sup> Heidegger saw Western metaphysics based on ontological concepts which were constructed. Destroying these concepts would bring out a meaning concealed in them that was covered up.

---

<sup>89</sup> C Davis, "Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms," *French Studies* 59, no. 3 (2005): 373–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143>.

<sup>90</sup> Davis, 377-379.

<sup>91</sup> Davis, 378.

<sup>92</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1962).

Derrida's method differs in that it focusses on oppositions in Western philosophy, in which binary oppositions are to be deconstructed. The two parts of the pair are opposed, and one term of the binary pair is privileged over the other. According to Derrida this privilege is always a construction. This is problematic because meaning has been covered up within these binary oppositions.<sup>93</sup> This has happened throughout the history of philosophy with the origin going back to Plato.

The deconstructive strategy consists in first overturning this opposition, followed by an undoing of the opposition. In this process a concept which had been covered up with Platonism will reappear. Only Derrida would not call the uncovered word a concept, rather it is a word in the chain of *différance*. This new word is in the realm of words that *différance* encompasses. *Différance* is another central term in the Derridean method. It is not a concept; it is something that comes before such a term. Rather than being a concept, it is what makes conceptuality possible in the first place. Derrida invented the word by combining the meanings of the two French verbs of *différer*. One means to defer, to put off, or to temporize. The other means to differ, in other words to be different, which implies spacing. The combination of the two makes for *différance*, which is a word that Derrida made through the replacing of the 'e' in *différence* to an 'a' in *différance*. The difference between the two words cannot be heard, only read. The implication of the difference only being able to be heard is that speech should not be privileged over writing, which Derrida argues it has been in the history of philosophy.<sup>94</sup> The very spelling of the word *différance* is therefore already deconstructing a privilege, namely the privilege of speech over writing.

What *différance* does, is recovering of the meaning that is lost in the binary pairs of opposition.<sup>95</sup> The combination of these verbs includes both spacing and temporizing. Derrida explains that he does not mean this in an active sense, since *différance* is neither active nor passive, and furthermore neither present nor absent, rather it is a certain alterity 'outside' of presence and absence.<sup>96</sup> Here you can already see the third option in oppositions in the process of *différance*, namely in presence/absence and active/passive.

*"What is written as différence, then, will be the playing movement that "produces"—by means of something that is not simply an activity—these differences, these effects of difference.*<sup>97</sup> Derrida means that *différance* is the origin of the differences, through a playing movement instilled in language. It does so through substitutions which can be found inside texts. An example of such a

---

<sup>93</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, transl. Alan Bass, Phoenix Books (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 40.

<sup>94</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>95</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 8-11.

<sup>96</sup> Derrida, *Margins*, 20.

<sup>97</sup> Derrida, *Margins*, 11.

substitution is for example the *pharmakon* from *Plato's Pharmacy*.<sup>98</sup> It is the *différance* that arose from Derrida's overturning the opposition between poison and remedy in Plato's *Phaedrus*.<sup>99</sup> It is simultaneously both and neither poison and/or remedy, inside and/or outside, good and/or evil. The opposition in *différance* can never be resolved, it is always both and neither the two parts of the binary pair that is deconstructed. It's being unresolved is what makes it productive.<sup>100</sup>

*Différance* can be found through the traces it leaves, which again are never present, but are like a past which was never present, or a "*simulacrum of presence*."<sup>101</sup> They are never present, yet they can be found. The traces are left in the texts that are deconstructed. A heuristic reading of the text will hunt down these traces in order to uncover the *différance* and the meaning that was covered over. To be sure, for Derrida, a text deconstructs itself. This deconstruction can be found and described through the traces left in the text.

The next section will discuss the theme of *différance* in *On Touching*, in order to position the book within Derrida's general strategy, with the aim of showing how *différance* of the limit is the result of the deconstruction of the philosophy of touch. The aim is to show how *On Touching* is a book about touching, however it is also a book which fits within the deconstructive Derridean project. What this means is that touching is another philosophical topic in which alterity needs to be affirmed. The importance of this affirmation will be shown in section 2.4, where I will argue that *On Touching* being informed by Derrida's ethics means that thinking *différance* is indeed always already a thinking of ethics.

### 2.3 Tact/Skin/Limit as Différance

Derrida's mention of *différance* in *On Touching* is very sparse, and only makes an appearance later on in the book.<sup>102</sup> This could be due to this book being written later in his career, when his framing of the deconstructive method had changed somewhat. From the 1980s/1990s onward, attention towards politics allegedly increased, with deconstruction dealing with themes such as law and justice.<sup>103</sup> Even later, from around the start of the century, Derrida went on to define deconstruction as dealing with the impossible possibility of certain concepts. *On Touching* was written in the late 1990s/early 2000s, which is why the word *différance* is not as present as it would be in earlier works, but I argue that the writing in paradoxes, specifically the touchable untouchable, and the possible

---

<sup>98</sup> Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy."

<sup>99</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>100</sup> Derrida, *Positions*, 41-44.

<sup>101</sup> Derrida, *Margins*, 24.

<sup>102</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 229, 298, 230.

<sup>103</sup> We will see in section 2.5 that Derrida himself denies this turn, arguing that a thinking of *différance* has always been a thinking of the political and ethical.

impossibility of touching, relates to the possible impossible and thus to *différance*. I argue that this language of the possible impossibility of touch, as well as the untouchable touchability, is *différance*. It is the opposition between possible and impossible, whilst describing things as being both, making for a different way of speaking of *différance*.

Where Derrida does speak of *différance*, he speaks of haptical *différance*, referring to the interruption that is to do with touch. This haptical *différance*, this interruption, is the very possibility of contact. It is located between two surfaces (that can touch) and is the very condition of contact.<sup>104</sup> This theme of *différance* being the very possibility (of the possibility) of a factor X is central to the deconstructive method. When we follow this line of inquiry, what is the Platonic opposition from which Derrida extracted the *différance*? The opposition in *On Touching* is the opposition between touching and the other senses, in which touch is hierarchized over the other senses. All that is left to be done in the deconstructive investigation is to see what this haptical *différance* is, which is the result of the overturning of the opposition between touch and the other senses.

Derrida also claims that tact is *différance*, and that the law of tact is *différance*. There is a limit which is untouchable and intangible. What is untouchable cannot be touched. What is intangible cannot be perceived in any way. This limit is what constitutes tact, which is a limit located between the untouchable and the intangible. It is neither and it is both. Touching with tact is touching without touching, since there is a tact for that which does not want to/cannot be touched.

To touch with tact is, thanks to you, because of you, to break with immediacy, with the immediate given wrongly associated with touch and on which all bets are always placed, as on self-presence, by transcendental idealism (Kantian or Husserlian intuitionism) or by ontology, the thinking of presence of beings or of being-*there as such* in its Being, the thinking of the body proper or flesh.<sup>105</sup>

The tact is the limit between me and you, the limit and distance which besides being a distance is what makes our touching possible in the first place. The law of tact inhabits touching as a moderation of touching. It makes sure one does not exaggerate when touching another, to keep a respectful distance. The law of tact was inspired by Nancy, for who touching is also always already withdrawing.<sup>106</sup> Tact is *différance*, constituted by the limit, located between the intangible and untouchable.<sup>107</sup> What is more is that Derrida explains that the exact word tact is not important. He

---

<sup>104</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 229.

<sup>105</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 293.

<sup>106</sup> Sarah Jackson, "The Law of Tact," in *Tactile Poetics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 52–59, <https://doi.org/10.3366/j.ctt16r0jh4.7>.

<sup>107</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 295-298.

finds that it could be replaced with decency or modesty. Tact/modesty/decency is made possible by the limit and is what makes touching the untouchable possible. I argue that even though Derrida argues that tact is made possible by the limit, he certainly also considers it to be a limit. The limit is where touching happens, and what makes touching possible. Tact is described in the same way, we cannot touch one another without tact, and touching another always involves tact. Tact is a limit.

I furthermore argue that limit is also *différance*. It is what makes possible touching, as well as impossible. It defers touching, it is the interruption of touching. The characteristics of deferring, the being the very possibility of, and being the possible impossible all belong to the chain of words that is *différance*, and therefore besides tact, the limit in touching also belongs there, maybe even before tact, since tact itself is a limit. Skin then also belongs to this chain of words that is *différance*. Again, it is where touching happens, therefore being the very possibility of touching. It is the very condition of contact.<sup>108</sup> At the same time, it is an interruption, a distance, the impossibility of touching. The limit is the *différance* that follows from the deconstruction of the history of the philosophy of touch, and from the deconstruction of the opposition between touch and the other senses in which touch is privileged. *Différance* itself is liminal in a way. What is a liminal space? It is a space occupied between two points, a space of transition. It is neither the points in which it is in between, but it also has aspects of both.<sup>109</sup> *Différance* is like this liminal space but differs in the sense that it is not a transition between the two points of the binary opposition, rather it is a permanent third option between the two, which uncovers the meaning that the opposition had covered over.

There is haptical *Différance* in the philosophy of touch, for Derrida. This *Différance* comes in the form of a limit, which can be the skin or the law of tact. Limit as *Différance* is important for Derrida because it ensures the distance between the subject and the other. It prevents the appropriation of the other, in other words it ensures that tact is paid to the alterity of the other. The next section will explain why this alterity of the other matters for Derrida's thinking of ethics and political, which are related.

## 2.4 Derrida and Ethics

It is often claimed that Derrida and deconstruction took an ethical and political turn in the 1980s and 1990s. Derrida personally has refuted this claim. He explains:

---

<sup>108</sup> Jackson, 60.

<sup>109</sup> For anthropologist Victor Turner, the liminal space was a space occupied in transitional rituals. He describes this in his seminal *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. When a member of the Ndembu tribe was to become chief, there was a ritual process to go through. During this ritual the subject would be neither member nor chief, occupying a space between the two, the liminal space.

The thinking of the political has always been a thinking of *différance* and the thinking of the political, of the contour and *limits* of the political, especially around the enigma or the autoimmune of their *double bind* of the democratic.<sup>110</sup>

By the ethical or political turn is meant that Derrida turns towards the themes of ethics and politics in his work, implying that these played no role in his thought before. For example, in *Specters of Marx* he speaks of the political landscape of the 90s as well as the legacy of Marxism, and in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* he speaks of the ethics involved in the refugee crisis.<sup>111</sup> Derrida would allegedly not have spoken about themes such as politics and ethics in the earlier decades of his career. However, Derrida claims that thinking *différance* has always thinking the political. What follows next is a discussion of Derrida's conception of the ethical and its derivation from Levinasian ethics. I will show how central to Derrida's ethics is the responsibility to the other, and the double bind involved in this. The double bind refers to the difficulty in carrying responsibility to both the general and the singular other, which reflects in the disconnect between ethics and politics.

I will argue that the importance of the alterity of the other in Derrida's ethics is what informs his discussion of haptocentrism in *On Touching* and is the reason why a discussion of haptocentrism was relevant for Derrida in the first place. Furthermore, *On Touching* is a book in which touching is the main theme, and ethics are not explicitly discussed, yet ethics inform the reason behind Derrida's discussion of touching. I therefore argue that *On Touching* proves Derrida's point that thinking deconstruction and *Différance* is always already a thinking of ethics and politics, and that speaking of a turning towards these themes does not hold up. Derrida never turned to ethics, politics, and justice, rather it always already informed his philosophy.

Derrida's 1997 *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* is an extensive discussion of Levinas' ethics.<sup>112</sup> This is relevant because Derrida discusses not only Levinas' ethics but also his views on said ethics and the relationship between ethics and politics. Derrida is to a large extent indebted to Levinas when it comes to ethics, and to Levinas' conceptions of the Other and alterity.

What is central in the book is the concept of hospitality. This Levinasian concept is what gives Derrida access to Levinas' ethics as well as the difficult relation ethics have with politics in Levinas' work. By hospitality is meant the welcoming by the subject of the other into the subject's home,

---

<sup>110</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B Naas, Meridian (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 39.

<sup>111</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*; Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*.

<sup>112</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*.

which according to Derrida forms the basis of Levinas' ethics, and actually is Levinas' ethics.<sup>113</sup> In Levinasian terms hospitality is a welcoming of the face. The encounter with the face of another is the start of ethics for Levinas, the "thou shalt not kill." The face represents the whole of others and the ethical obligation to these others. Hospitality is linked to the face, in the welcoming of the face. In the welcoming of the face, you are welcoming the other.<sup>114</sup>

The difficulty in Levinas lies in the distance between an ethics of hospitality on the one hand, and judiciary and political ethics on the other hand.<sup>115</sup> Derrida argues that the second cannot simply be derived from the first. How can a finite and determinate law and politics be derived from an ethics that is unconditional and infinite? And yet we do have a need for politics and judiciary, therefore Derrida wants to think through the gap between the two.

First, the ethics of hospitality have to be thought, before turning to the politics of hospitality, because ethics come before politics for Levinas and for Derrida. Earlier I said that hospitality involved the subject's welcoming of the other. It is a little more complicated than that. In Levinas, the Other always comes first, the Other precedes the subject. The welcome of the other also precedes the welcome of the subject. The other already welcomes the subject before the subject can welcome the other. The subject is welcomed in his home by the other, his welcoming is always already a response to the welcoming of the other, because the other is always already in the subject.<sup>116</sup>

The other who does the welcoming is gendered for Levinas, for whom alterity is female. It is the woman who welcomes, the man who is welcomed. Derrida does not adopt Levinas' gendered side of his ethics, arguing it is a little problematic and unnecessary, the same way he did in *On Touching*.<sup>117</sup> Even though Levinas might not have been the biggest feminist, his alterity does inform Derrida, hence why it is important here.

What is central in Levinas' ethics is the third person, according to Derrida. Derrida describes them as the third neighbor, my neighbor's neighbor. There is a distance between me and my neighbor, I do not know this neighbor, but I do carry an ethical responsibility for them all the same. This other of the other symbolizes the alterior other, all others who I do not directly face, but who are represented in the face of the direct other. The other of the other actually is the origin of the question of politics, justice, philosophy, etc.<sup>118</sup> It is third for whom I carry ethical responsibility, which

---

<sup>113</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 15.

<sup>114</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 22.

<sup>115</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 19.

<sup>116</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 23-25.

<sup>117</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 25; Derrida, *On Touching*, 79-80.

<sup>118</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 29-31.

for Derrida points to a move *away from immediacy* in Levinas, away from the direct face to face. In Levinas' *Peace and Proximity*, Levinas explains:<sup>119</sup>

Doubtless, responsibility for the other human being is, in its *immediacy, anterior to every question*. But how does responsibility obligate if a third troubles this exteriority of two where my subjection of the subject is subjection to my neighbor? The third is other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply their fellow. What am I to do? What have they already done to one another? Who passes before the other in my responsibility? What, then, are the other and the third with respect to one another? *Birth of the question*.

The first question in the interhuman is the *question of justice*. Henceforth it is *necessary to know*, to become consciousness. Comparison is superimposed onto my relation with the *unique* and the incomparable, and, in view of equity and equality, a weighing, a thinking, a calculation, the *comparison of incomparables*, and, consequently, the neutrality—presence of representation—of being, the thematization and the visibility of the face.<sup>120</sup>

The responsibility for the third comes with a problematic. When protecting the third, or when upholding the responsibility for the general other, a specific other might not be protected or have responsibility upheld for them. This happens through a generalization which hides the trace that the face leaves in the self. This also works the other way around, with a violation of responsibility for the third when upholding responsibility for the unique other with whom we are face to face. Derrida claims that Levinas does not point out this double bind, which means that the emphasis on the double constraint is Derrida's.<sup>121</sup>

The double bind also applies to the jump from ethics to politics and justice. In order to have justice for the third, laws are needed. However, laws only uphold justice for the third or general other, they violate the first or singular other.<sup>122</sup> What is furthermore a problem is that the (feminine) alterity of the other cannot be caught for Levinas. Yet she is always there. She is always already there. The experiencing of this alterity of the other is what hospitality is for Derrida.<sup>123</sup> It manifests itself in an infinite hospitality for the general other. The welcome of the other is an infinite welcome.

---

<sup>119</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>120</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 32.

<sup>121</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 33, 98.

<sup>122</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 33.

<sup>123</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 46.



The problem is when translating this into a finite politics and judiciary in practice. Ethics, or hospitality, will return to the finite for Derrida, due to the haunting alterity of the other. The other always already inhabits the self, but it cannot be accessed. The result is that in ethical consideration the self is always interrupted by this other, because of the inaccessibility. The other cannot be accessed, therefore a purely ethical decision cannot be made. The other already speaks from the self, therefore the self cannot alone come to a decision. The self is interrupted by the self as other, which is one of the definitions of hospitality for Derrida.<sup>124</sup> The subject before any self-identity is already the welcome of the hospitality from the other. The self is a host of the other but becomes hostage to the other due to the responsibility and inescapability of their alterity. Levinas says of this in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*:<sup>125</sup>

Responsibility for the Other is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to the Other would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted. The ipseity, in the passivity without *arche* characteristic of identity, is hostage. The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone.<sup>126</sup>

Let us now turn to the political and juridical, which Derrida argues cannot be directly derived from ethics. Justice is another important element for Derrida for which he argues the alterity of the other plays a major role. Regarding justice he explains:

...if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants*, who would no longer be *revenants* but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome—without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for *justice*. Present existence or essence has never been the condition, object, or the *thing* [chose] of justice.<sup>127</sup>

We do not only have a responsibility of justice for those who are alive right now. Justice also needs to be upheld for those who have passed and for those not yet born. A justice which only counts for those alive is not true justice for Derrida, it must be a justice beyond living presence.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>124</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 51-54.

<sup>125</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA.: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

<sup>126</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 55.

<sup>127</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 220.

<sup>128</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii-xix.

A political issue that is central here for Derrida is the global problematic of refugees and other stateless individuals. These people are not welcome anywhere, do not enjoy hospitality anywhere, which makes this problematic a crime against hospitality.<sup>129</sup> We should welcome them into our homes, which are the nation-states, yet we do not. There seems to be a gap between the ethics of hospitality and our political realities. Most refugees are the result of war, which we often assume is the opposite of peace. Derrida explains how Levinas has a different conception of peace. He sees peace not as something political, but rather as a concept that exceeds politics. It is both beyond politics as well as inside politics. Peace deconstructs and interrupts itself.<sup>130</sup> The implication is that peace cannot be reached through purely political means, or purely political thought. Yet it is where ethics begin for Levinas, in the hospitality of the welcoming of the face of the other, by the way of the interruption of the self by the third. The “thou shalt not kill” in the face of the other is the very origin of ethics. Derrida explains that this face of the other carries a “spectral aura.”<sup>131</sup> It is the face of a ghost. What is meant is that the face of the other is not present, rather it is alterior. There is a threat of visitation, similar to the visitation of a ghost. We must welcome the face of the other in its alterity, meaning that we cannot make present this face, or know its properties. Hospitality goes hand in hand with spectrality for Derrida.<sup>132</sup> We must welcome that which we cannot know.

Peace relates back to the thinking of ethics as otherness, when Derrida claims that one cannot be at peace with what is same, only with that which is other.<sup>133</sup> The result is that if we want to seriously rethink peace in order to pursue it, a thinking of ethics as hospitality which is responsibility for the alterity of the other is important. The alterity always comes first, both for Levinas and for Derrida. Derrida explains how “There would be neither welcome, nor hospitality, without this radical alterity, which itself presupposes separation.”<sup>134</sup>

What is central in the problematic of the refugees is the nation-state, who wishes to regulate its borders and the related immigration flows. When thinking back to the self as being both host and hostage of the other, this also applied to the nation-state, Derrida argues. The nation-state is never purely self, it is already haunted by the alterity of the foreign other. Those who occupy the country are as a result, guests in their own state.<sup>135</sup> A realization of this is necessary in order to better the situation and lessen the hostility to those supposedly foreign to the nation-state. The double blind of having to disregard the singular other when upholding responsibility for the general other, and vice

---

<sup>129</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 71.

<sup>130</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 80.

<sup>131</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 111.

<sup>132</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 111-112.

<sup>133</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 85.

<sup>134</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 92.

<sup>135</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 93.

versa, also applies to the nation-state. The nation-state disregards the singular, by a generalization which hides the trace of the face of the other. The result is an establishment of sameness and a disregard of the plurality, which leads to the hostility of the foreign. Derrida offers a way out of the double-bind, by proposing a global humanitarian commitment which works beyond the self-interested nation-state. The result would be a reestablishment of the hospitality towards refugees and immigrants which has been neglected by the nation-state.<sup>136</sup>

This is the leap that must be taken between ethics and the political, in order to bridge the gap. To be sure, the gap cannot be closed, but a striving for peace, for perfection, is the project which happens in this never closing gap. Decisions have to be made, and the gap is where they are made. The decision is never perfect because the calculations that go into the decision can never be completed, owing to a limitless past and future. The leaping into the decision interrupts this limitless time.<sup>137</sup>

Returning to the theme of this thesis, the limit in touching as *différance* is important for Derrida because it ensures respect for the alterity of the other. The importance lies in the relation to ethics for Derrida. His ethics are largely informed by Levinas' concepts of hospitality and the welcome. The face of the other welcomes the subject before the subject can welcome the other. The alterity of the face of the other needs to be treated with respect, or tact.

The alterity of the other needs to be ensured in all philosophical spaces, which also includes the philosophy of touch. What is problematic for Derrida in haptocentrism is a neglect of the alterity of the other, which is why *On Touching* had to be written, in order to deconstruct this philosophy of touch, resulting in an establishment of tact for the other. *On Touching* is about touching, but the importance of the book lies in it making sure that in thinking touching, the inescapability of the alterity of the other is ensured. *On Touching* is not explicitly about ethics and politics, however it is informed by these themes, which is why I argue that *différance* is indeed always already a thinking of ethics and politics. The implication is that Derrida never turned to ethics and politics, they were always already there in his work.

Besides being inescapable, the other is also unknowable. The result is that ethical decision should be made without being fully informed. On top on that, there is ethical responsibility for both the singular and the general, and maintaining one means violating the other. Derrida refers to the double responsibility as the double bind. The double bind also has as a result that there is a gap between ethics and politics and the judiciary. The hospitality in the face of the other, or the alterity

---

<sup>136</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 98-101.

<sup>137</sup> Derrida, *Adieu*, 116-117.

of the other, is infinite, therefore ethics are infinite. However, politics and justice are finite, because political and judiciary decisions made are interruptions in the infinite ethical calculations. The result is that politics and the judiciary cannot be directly derived from ethics, and that there is a gap. In this gap the decisions have to be made, in the leap involved in making ethical decisions. Derrida's ethical thinking applies to the case of the refugees and immigrants of the world, who are treated with hostility by the nation-states. There needs to come a realization that the citizen is also first a guest in their country, because the welcome of the other precedes theirs.

## 2.5 Conclusion

'Haunting' in *Specters of Marx*, delineates the haunting of the specter, which means the specter is neither present nor absent, it haunts its subject. In *On Touching*, haunting is done by the other, or alterity. Haunting is a useful term for Derrida because it allows him to further insist on the alterity of the other, which he sees missing in phenomenology specifically and the philosophy of touch more generally. The importance of alterity lies in its necessity in conceiving the self, as well as the ethical implication of carrying responsibility for the other.

In *On Touching*, Derrida speaks of the haptical *différance*. I have argued that within the deconstructive strategy more generally, the opposition in *On Touching* is the opposition between touching and the other senses, and that the skin, tact, and the limit in general are *différance* in touching. I came to this conclusion arguing that the limit, which can be either skin or tact, is what makes possible the very concept of touching, and is located between the two points that touch, being neither and both. It was furthermore argued by me that *différance* in itself is a liminal word, given that it is located between two other words, taking up meaning from both, as well as the meaning that it uncovers when reversing and dissolving the Platonic opposition.

I argue that the speaking of touching in *On Touching* is motivated by a consideration of ethics in touching. Derrida needs to ensure the alterity of the other, also in the philosophy of touch. *On Touching* is a book which Derrida wrote after or during the alleged ethical/political turn. I have argued that even though it does not explicitly discuss ethics or politics, it is informed by it. This points to Derrida's claim that thinking deconstruction and *différance* is always already a thinking of politics and ethics. Therefore, the book fits with Derrida's denial of such a turn. *On Touching* is a book where mostly touching is discussed, not ethics or politics explicitly, yet I argue they largely inform the book.

## Conclusion

In his book *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Jacques Derrida considers the history of philosophy to be haptocentric. By haptocentrism, he means that in philosophy, touching is privileged over the other

senses. Haptocentrism is problematic for Derrida, because its consequence is an immediate, unlimited access to the self and to the other. The result are conceptions of the self and the other, which do not consider the alterity of this other. The alterity of the other matters for Derrida, because without this alterity, ethics, politics, and justice cannot be properly thought.

The academic discussion in *On Touching* does not properly consider what makes haptocentrism so problematic for Derrida. There is division on what the central theme and thesis of *On Touching* is. A multitude of themes has been proposed by commentators, and I have argued that they are connected in their relation to alterity. What is furthermore missing in the academic discussion of *On Touching*, is a pointing towards the importance of alterity for Derrida, which is its role in Derrida's thinking of ethics.

What pointed to the centrality of alterity and limit in *On Touching*, is the opposition between the phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the one hand, and Jean-Luc Nancy on the other hand. Derrida in the book seemingly gives an overview of haptocentrism throughout history, but when thinking his discussions of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Nancy together, it becomes clear what is problematic for him. What is problematic can be found in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the solution can be found in Nancy. Starting with the problem, the phenomenological tradition considers it impossible to know the things-in-themselves, and as a solution attempts to describe how things are perceived in the consciousness of the subject. For Derrida, the risk in this process is a reduction of the other to the consciousness of the self, and a neglect of the alterity of the other. Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological tradition, described how self-touching gave intuitive and immediate access to the self, free from outside influence. Only touching has this ability, which is why Derrida considers this haptocentric. Husserl refers to this access to the self as auto-affection. Derrida disagrees with this auto-affection, arguing that the self, and access to this conception of the self, is always already haunted by otherness. What is meant by haunted, is that otherness is neither present nor absent, yet exerts influence on the conception of the self. The result is hetero-affection, pointing to difference rather than sameness, because of the haunting of the other always already present in self-touching. Husserl considered unmediated experience of self, however, did see mediated contact with the other, through empathy and introjection.

With Merleau-Ponty, contact with the other, and access to the other, also becomes immediate and unlimited. From his point of view, we are all bodies part of a borderless world in which we all intuitively have access to each other, and in which my here and your there are completely dissolved. I can have the same understanding of you that you have of yourself. What Merleau-Ponty risks, according to Derrida, is a sublation of the self and the other into sameness. In this borderless world of interchangeable bodies, with a complete neglect of any kind of alterity,

separate conceptions of self and other become impossible to think. Derrida, who warns against this sublation, because when conceptions of self and other are sublated into sameness, the responsibility of the self for the other cannot be thought.

In order to counter Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's neglect of alterity, Derrida turns to Jean-Luc Nancy and his introduction of liminality into the philosophy of touch. For Nancy there is always a sense of untouchability in touching. This untouchability is constituted by the limit, which always keeps something out of reach when touching happens. At the same time, the limit is where touching happens, you can only touch something on its exterior, or its limit. The limit in this way becomes touchable untouchable. Think of the skin, which is where one touches the self or another, but which also keeps behind a limit the rest of the respective self or other. Derrida needs this touchable untouchable limit in order to reintroduce mediacy in the philosophy of touching, so that the alterity of the other is not neglected. I have argued that the liminality of the skin has served as a response to Husserl's unmediated access and conception of self in *On Touching*. The introduction of the interruption of the skin makes self-touching no longer limitless. The skin serves as metonymy for alterity, which always already haunts the self, making Husserl's auto-affection impossible. Another liminal term introduced by Nancy was tact, from which Derrida derived the law of tact. Tact means that one has to respect the other by keeping some distance, by acknowledging that the other is other and cannot be internalized into the self. This law of tact functions as a limit on which the other is touched, and I argued that this law of tact functions as a response to Merleau-Ponty's unmediated access to the other, as a limit which has mediateness as its consequence. A tact which ensures distance to the other ensures a tact or respect for the alterity of the other.

The haunting of alterity of the other functions as a limit to unmediated access to self and other, and ensures separation between conceptions of the two, which is important for Derrida. Derrida acknowledges Nancy's contribution to the philosophy of touch by introducing the limit but argued that ultimately Nancy's thinking of touching has an element of limitlessness, which is why it was important for Derrida to continue insisting on liminality in touching. Derrida started to speak of haunting in *Specters of Marx*, in reference to Marx' specters and the specter of Marx. Here the specter as, outside of presence and absence, was always already there. In *On Touching*, it was the alterity of the other which did the haunting, and therefore was always already there, before the very conception of the self, actually being the very possibility of a conception of the self. Haunting is a term within hauntology that lets Derrida describe the activity of the other, or of the specter, without resorting to the presentist verb 'to be'.

The alterity, which is third way out of the presence/absence opposition, is within the play of *différance*. This *différance* is a word within the Derridean deconstructive strategy, which comes forth when deconstructing Platonic oppositions. I have argued that the skin, the law of tact, and the limit

more generally, for Derrida, are *différance*. The skin and the law of tact are limits, which are between two points, and are the very possibility of touching, resulting from the deconstruction of the philosophy of touch. *Différance* itself is a liminal word. It is between two points, adopting meaning from both, but at the same time deferring them and differing from them, the same way liminal space does.

When the other is appropriated by the self, an ethical thinking of responsibility for the other cannot be thought. Derrida's thinking of ethics consists in a double bind between responsibility of the self for the singular other and responsibility for the general other. One cannot uphold the responsibility for the one without breaking the responsibility for the other. Therefore, politics cannot be directly derived from ethics. What this means is that in lawmaking, as well as in every ethical decision that is made, there must always be a leap of faith. The other cannot be known, yet this would be necessary to make completely informed and just decision. The impossibility makes possible the leap of faith in the making of ethical decisions and in the leaping from infinite ethics to finite politics. These ethical considerations cannot be thought without considering the alterity of both the singular and the general other, which is why Derrida wants to ensure this alterity in *On Touching*, as well as in supposedly all his work. Thinking *différance* is always already a thinking of ethics, the political, and justice, for Derrida. Therefore, skin, tact, and the limit in general, as *différance*, play an ethical role, namely the assurance of the alterity of the other. *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, therefore, is a testament to the thinking ethics that is deconstruction. Derrida's thinking is and has always been a thinking of ethics, politics, and justice, which means a turning towards these concepts never occurred.

## References

1. Armour, Ellen T. "Touching Transcendence: Sexual Difference and Sacrality in Derrida's *Le Toucher*." Book. In *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, edited by Kevin Hart and Yvonne Sherwood, 351–61, 2005.
2. Caputo, John D. "The Good News about Alterity." Bookitem. In *The Essential Caputo*, 231–43. Indiana University Press, 2018.
3. Castaño, Héctor G. "A Worldless Flesh: Derrida, Merleau-Ponty and the Body in Transcultural Perspective." Article. *Parallax (Leeds, England)* 25, no. 1 (2019): 42–57.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2019.1570605>.
4. Colebrook, Claire. *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2014.
5. Davis, C. "Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms." *French Studies* 59, no. 3 (2005): 373–79.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143>.

6. "Derrida, Jacques | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Accessed June 7, 2022.  
<https://iep.utm.edu/jacques-derrida/>.
7. Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Meridian. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999.
8. ———. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
9. ———. *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy*. Translated by Christine Irizarry. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005.
10. ———. "Plato's Pharmacy." In *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. London: Continuum, 2004.
11. ———. *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass. Phoenix Books. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
12. ———. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B Naas. Meridian. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005.
13. ———. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 2006.
14. Flakne, April. "Contact/Improv: A Synaesthetic Rejoinder To Derrida's Reading of Merleau-Ponty." *Refuguring Continental Philosophy* 32 (2007): 42–49.
15. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1962.
16. Herrick, T. "'A Book Which Is No Longer Discussed Today': Tran Duc Thao, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66, no. 1 (2005): 113–31.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2005.0027>.
17. Herrick, Tim. "'A Book Which Is No Longer Discussed Today': Tran Duc Thao, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66, no. 1 (2005): 113–31.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2005.0027>.
18. Hillis Miller, J. "Touching Derrida Touching Nancy: The Main Traits of Derrida's Hand." *Derrida Today* 1, no. 2 (2008): 145–66. <https://doi.org/10.3366/e1754850008000201>.
19. Hintikka, Jaakko. "THE NOTION OF INTUITION IN HUSSERL." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 57, no. 224 (2) (2003): 169–91.
20. Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy Volume II: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989.
21. James, Ian. "Haptocentrism." *Radical Philosophy*, no. 138 (2006): 47–49.
22. Landes, Donald A. "'Le Toucher' and the 'Corpus' of Tact: Exploring Touch and Technicity with



- Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy." *L'Esprit Créateur* 47, no. 3 (2007): 80–92.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2007.0052>.
23. Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. New York: Colombia University Press, 1999.
  24. Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA.: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
  25. Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Translated by Robert C. Tucker, Second., 469–500. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.
  26. McQuillan, Martin. "Toucher I: (The Problem Translated by Richard C. McCleary. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964.
  27. Naas, Michael. "In and Out of Touch: Derrida's" Le Toucher"." *Research in Phenomenology* 31 (2001): 258–65.
  28. Plato. *Phaedrus*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
  29. Plotnitsky, Arkady. "Différential Atopologies, Mathematical and Ethico-Political: Light, Space, and Alterity in Derrida." Article. *The European Legacy, toward New Paradigms* 12, no. 4 (2007): 443–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770701396288>.
  30. Reynolds, Jack. "The Other of Derridean Deconstruction: Levinas, Phenomenology and the Question of Responsibility." *Minerva: An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. January 2001 (2001): 31–62. <http://www.mic.ul.ie/stephen/derrida.pdf>.
  31. ———. "Touched by Time: Some Critical Reflections on Derrida's Engagement with Merleau-Ponty in Le Toucher." *Sophia* 47, no. 3 (2008): 311–25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-008-0070-7>.
  32. Sarah Jackson. "The Law of Tact." In *Tactile Poetics*, 51–63. Edinburgh University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.3366/j.ctt16r0jh4.7>.
  33. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Book. The Floating Press, 2009.
  34. Watkin, Christopher. "A Different Alterity: Jean-Luc Nancy's 'Singular Plural.'" Article. *Paragraph (Modern Critical Theory Group)* 30, no. 2 (2007): 50–64. <https://doi.org/10.3366/prg.2007.0026>.
  35. "ἅπτω | Billmounce.Com." Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/hapto>.