From the Unconditioned to Unconditional Claims

Violence, Radical Theology, and Crisis

Jason W. Alvis and Jeffrey W. Robbins
Guest Editors

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In memory of Thomas J.J. Altizer († 28 November 2018)

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In public cases of violence, nearly without fail the topics of fanaticism or fundamentalism arise as the insignium for their root cause, leading either to laughter or disgust at their continued possibility in our age of reason. In 2001, a most violent year, Jürgen Habermas called for the “liquidation of unconditional claims.” In *The Liberating Power of Symbols*, he argued that both the narrative structure of human life and the wickedness of 20th century European conflicts should produce in us a sense of a humble *fallibility* that leads to the recognition that our “unconditional claims” always are raised under “contingent conditions.”¹ Such a liquidation for Habermas becomes an essential task for philosophy, a means of communicative reason, yet it seems grounded in the commonsense truism that, as the German poet Novalis put it so well, “Everywhere we search for the unconditioned [*das Unbedingte*], but always only find things [*Dinge*].”² The two seem to go hand in hand. Perhaps studies of the unconditioned without unconditional claims are empty; studies of unconditional claims without the unconditioned are blind.

It is far from conclusive, however, what the “unconditional” in “unconditional claims” might reference: is it the infinite absence of conditions to which

1 Jürgen Habermas, *The Liberating Power of Symbols*. (New York: Polity Press 2001) p. 82, cf. 37 & 33.

2 Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), *Novalis Schriften*, Eds. P. Kluckhohn and R. Samuel (Stuttgart Germany: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1983), 413.

one should be inspired to attain, or rather the totality of all conditions? Could it be an *idea* capable of surviving the trial of any conditions whatsoever, therefore retaining an untouchable, unscathed, and holy sense? Could the unconditioned be *expressed* by reference to a reduction of objects to a pure intelligibility via an idealized state of consciousness that is at once pure and itself unfiltered, therefore collapsing or folding the interactive gap between stimuli and consciousness? Or perhaps in more simple (onto)theological terms, is the unconditioned either a foremost name of God, or is it an idol?

Admittedly, there is little about the word “unconditioned” that immediately stirs our attention or rouses our interest. At first it seems incredibly underwhelming. Yet the topic bears a complex and intriguing history in metaphysics, appearing already in Plato’s *Republic*, where the challenge was issued to employ reason’s deductive measures in the intelligible world “in order that it may ascend *as far as the unconditioned*.”³ This more philosophical and indeed optimistic ideal is perhaps what inspired Spinoza’s rational striving for eternity, which despite never achieving it, operates with a certain unconditioned inaccessibility. Yet it was with Kant that *das Unbedingte* (a frequent technical term used in the First Critique) became a more positive depiction of the transcendental relation with noumena – the “thing of all things” and unconditioned ground of “possibility” (i.e. God). It is a non-empirical concept or *Idee* subjectively oriented within our minds that inspires our conduction of these investigations.⁴ Not unlike Plato’s goal, the antinomy of pure reason is that its ultimate prize originates in the desire for the cause with no prior cause.⁵

Following Kant, scholarship that references the unconditioned amounted to variations of sketches related to this problem. The younger Schelling laid emphasis upon a notion cursorily sketched, yet left stillborn by Kant – that the unconditioned (or “the absolute”) is in need of a certain “spontaneity”, and is ontologically prior to even the very notion of “distinctions.”⁶ In his “System of Transcendental Idealism” whereby human reason can find satisfaction

3 According to Mansel, Plato seeks “(μέχρι τοῦ ἀνυποθέτου), the first principle of the universe, and having grasped this, may then lay hold of the principles next adjacent to it, and so go down to the end, using no sensible aids whatever, but employing abstract forms throughout, and terminating in forms.” Plato seeks ‘to ascend to the unconditioned, and thence to deduce the universe of conditioned existence.’ See here H.L. Mansel *The Philosophy of the Conditioned*. Mansel. p. 8.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965, p. A 312–338.

5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. A 307–309.

6 Schelling *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Forty Early Essays (1794–1796)*, trans Fritz Marti. (London: Associated University Presses, 1980), pp. 65–66.

in the reflection upon its own unconditionality, the unconditioned objectifies itself over and again in the finite subject's consciousness. Similarly, Hegel attended to an "unconditioned universal" that marks the unforeseeable unity of the ungraspable yet true object of consciousness. Our own self-assertions concerning what seems always out of bounds for questioning (the unconditioned) help us make sense of the infinite whole (although "It is not the object of sense-certainty that is the unconditioned; it is the object of perception which is the unconditioned.")⁷ One's essence is absolute freedom insofar as she herself reflect upon what matters to her "unconditionally."

1 The Unconditioned, the Death of God, and Contemporary Crises

This all too brief philosophical backdrop was also central to the death of God movement and the radical theological tradition emerging from it. It is with sadness that we must note that between the beginning of this edited collection and now in its completion, Thomas J.J. Altizer died. His death, and the "death of God" he so passionately championed, has left an impact upon Continental Philosophy of Religion in ways we often forget. The Death of God, as a "Radical Theology" of immanence, of finitude, and of the ontological priority of practice over doctrine, developed into an idea that drew attention to the deep ambivalences between religiosity and secularity at work in "the West" especially since the World Wars. These ambivalences sutured the secular to the religious as fast as it did drive a wedge between them. Here, between Christianity and its otherness, between those self-proclaimed believers and unbelievers, the Death of God movement became more than a catchphrase carved by Altizer into a table at a diner in Atlanta. Today it remains a thorn in the side of Western ideology. Our collection of essays, and this "field" of Continental Philosophy of Religion, would not be possible without the work of Altizer, who did so much to promote "dangerous" thinking especially in regards to theology and the Holy.

It is only fitting then that the topics around which this present collection revolve – the Unconditioned, violence, unconditional claims – all were essential to a figure who had a major impact on Altizer – Paul Tillich. Tillich, whose theologies of both conditioned things (his contemporary culture) and unconditioned ones (God, divinity) culminated into an uneasy reconciliation in his cultural theology in times of war, nihilism, and political exile. The uncondi-

7 G.W.F. Hegel, quoted and translated by Terry Pinkard in "Spirit as 'the Unconditioned'" in *A Companion to Hegel*, eds. S. Holgate, M. Baur. (London: Wiley, 2015), p. 93.

tioned ground of being is like a foreboding black hole, with holiness fluctuating between the demonic and the divine. Were it not for Tillich – who followed the traces left by German Idealism – the topic likely would have remained in the margins of an outdated philosophical epistemology. There is, however, something today that points to how the unconditioned gives rise to thought for a philosophy of religion or political theology. Not only does the idea of unconditional claims pose a challenge to anyone claiming relation with God; it also raises questions for anyone claiming to be free from belief in God. How do we maintain our unconditional claims despite full knowledge of our contingency and violence? A provisional answer can be found in Camus's quip, which still rings true both in a positive and negative sense: "To kill God is to become god oneself." (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*) Or together with Caputo, we might say that the desire for God outlives the death of God. Whether alongside, or *in lieu* of God, unconditional claims (which point to core *ideas* representing all things wild, unbounded, and uncultured) indeed abound as a kind of living under-world of present crises. If Tillich's "theology of crisis" struggled against "every unparadoxical, immediate, objective understanding of the unconditioned" and Altizer's understanding was that "the contemporary crisis in theology [is] a crisis arising within theology itself," then what are our contemporary *theological* crises?⁸

Before turning to the specific work of the individual contributors to this special issue and how they address the question of the unconditioned/unconditional, we may suggest three groupings of contemporary crises that are in demand of a theological response. These three groupings are not intended to be exhaustive, but both separately and together give some indication of the urgency of our present moment.

- 1) First, there is the global rise of *ethno-nationalist populism*, from Trump and Brexit, to Bolsonaro in Brazil, the current ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, the Law and Justice Party in Poland and beyond. As pointed out by many political theorists and commentators, populism in itself has no meaning on its own. In the words of Cas Mudde, it operates only as a "thin ideology," and therefore must attach itself to more fully fleshed out ideologies from either the left or the right of the political spectrum. So there can be both left-wing populism and right-wing populism; it can be either revolutionary or reactive. Even so, it has certain character traits – most notably, in spite of its claim to represent more

8 Paul Tillich quoted in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*. V. 1. ed James R. Robinson (Richmond VA: John Knox Press 1968) p. 141; Thomas J.J. Altizer in *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. with William Hamilton. (New York: Bibbs-Merrill Co. inc. New York. 1966), p. 110.

faithfully the genuine will of the people, it tends to be divisive, driven by an “us versus them” mentality that is as moralistic as it is antagonistic. In Mudde’s words, the virulent contemporary strand of ethno-nationalist populism splits society into “two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the pure people on the one end and the corrupt elite on the other.”⁹ By their moral valuation of purity and corruption, they are able to claim the right that they alone represent the people. In this way, populism is seen to function as a political cleansing. Because there is such confidence in the absolute rightness of the cause, there tends to be a certain willingness to forego or sacrifice the public institutions, deliberative processes, civil dialogue and decorum, and even the basic rule of law that characterize democratic culture and governance. This amounts to a crisis of law and of political legitimacy. It is easy to see how this willingness to sacrifice in the effort to cleanse functions as an unconditional. And the connections between the unconditional and violence pointed out by so many of the contributors below should sound as an alarm in these regards.

- 2) Connected to this first crisis is the second with respect to the *global flow of migration* and the attendant questions over national borders and the status of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants. This is a long crisis in the making, in some cases a direct result of war and political instability, and in others the indirect result of the transnational flow of capital. Just as resources have been extracted from those nations powerless to withstand the pressures of globalization, so too has human labor. While some see hoards lured by the promises of peace and prosperity, others point to the realities of political violence and economic exploitation. Questions of national identity and rights of citizenship are at stake. Even more, the multitude of those displaced from home, history and heritage, stripped of constitutional protections, and at the mercy of international law and relief agencies that at any moment can be rendered ineffective and unwelcome by the whims of the national political will, raise the question of bare human life. The very precarity reveals the conditional status of the supposed unconditional, where human rights are conditioned by citizenship and international law by national sovereignty.
- 3) From the state of politics and sometimes porous and sometimes walled-off borders mapping the earth, to the state of the earth itself, the third grouping of a crisis concerns the *climate, environmental devastation, and*

9 Cas Mudde, as quoted in Uri Friedman, “What is a Populist? And Is Donald Trump One?,” in *Atlantic*, February 27, 2017, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/.

massive species extinction. Sometimes referred to as the Anthropocene, it amounts to its own Copernican revolution in thought and action. It marks the present as a geological age in which human activity has proven to be the dominant force in shaping the climate and the environment where the specter of the tipping point looms, where the experts warn of the point of no return, where the irreversibility of the arrow of time can be as crippling as it is ominous. When thinking of the earth, the old politics predicated on national sovereignty seems antiquated at best. When thinking of what is good for the earth, the thought of what is good for humans seems secondary at best. And so, among the many crises this last grouping suggests is the need for a non-anthropological way of thought – not so much a thinking beyond the subject as an altered subjectivity where the earth is not the starting point, but also the end. The earth as the unconditioned from which – not so much all that we know, but rather all that we value – emerges into the conditioned cycles of life and death.

2 Contributions to This Special Issue

Every essay in this special issue retains wisdom applicable to at least one of these three aforementioned contemporary crises. Andrew Benjamin's contribution at first seems like a straightforward philosophical reflection on the Unconditioned. Yet it quickly becomes apparent there is something else in mind – the philosophical grounding of a political and ethical anthropology that can counter contemporary ontological violence. This gets developed through a reformulation of law vis-à-vis the unconditioned. Although Agamben's *homo sacer* (those *outside* the law) are not mentioned, Benjamin points to the law as the *sine qua non* of human finitude. For Pindar "Law [is] the king of all" (Νόμος ὁ πάντων βασιλεύς), and for Oedipus (in the *Antigone*) we should fear becoming a 'a lawless one' (ἄνομον) who also would lose her connection to God. Unconditional justice (law as the suspension of statutes) gives laws (*Nomoi* as the passing of statutes) their openness. To be is to *be-before-the-law* unconditionally. Yet this unconditioned is not a "basic" or "static" ontology, but rather an active force coursing through finitude, always present in our conditioned understandings of the infinite/finite. This is counter-Schmittian in the sense that it does not begin with faith or reason regarding God, with the Sovereign as the incarnation of the law, but rather the law's ever-sovereign qualitative priority, entailing the Feuerbachian conclusion that this unconditioned-God-law correlation has anthropological consequences. Activity is always activity-in-a-place, and by inverting Schmitt, the conditioned acts in relation to the Uncon-

ditioned by striving to be holy, and unconditionally ascribing dignity to others. This can help turn back ontological violence because it helps one's potentiality-to-be flourish, but in a way that allows for an unconditioned law of prescription, yet without necessary coercion: Dignity becomes the unconditional presence of this potentiality to be.

John Caputo's article is, in the Tillichian sense, a strenuous and challenging exercise in cultural theology that works on two distinct yet inseparable levels of thought, life, and politics. His analysis of the unconditional concerns "deep culture," (possibilities of the event, inchoate stratum, weak potentialities) and "manifest culture" (the place of access that reveals the real of human investment). The unconditional holds a religious depth that, following Levinas, leaves us in the accusative needing to respond to the ever-excessive imperatives that have always already been before us. It also will always already be there *after* us in a way that, following Derrida, causes us to look forward *ad infinitum*, acting with something not unlike a hope in the possibility of the world being otherwise than it is. As an equal opportunity accuser, Caputo applies his radical theology to the violence of both the political left and right. Especially in the U.S., Christian fundamentalists fail to recognize that many of their affective impulses, visceral bonds to being, and often primitive unconditional claims are based upon worries, fears, and struggles with the loss of culture and being. The political left fail to attend to the depth structure beyond the manifest culture, to the uncontrollable excesses of a *religion before religion* that "always gets there first." The right needs to see that unconditional claims are always propositional and never undeconstructible as claims. The left needs to learn that the unconditional is fueled by transgression: "Close down the unconditional and the computers will run everything. It will be robots all the way down." Religion/the Unconditioned is a *pharmakon* characterized by its *whipsaw effect*, swinging through the most intense of extremes between violence and non-violence; but this ambivalence should lead us into love, not nihilism.

Burkhard Liebsch wonders: What is the worst, most "disastrous," kind of violence? In addressing that question, Liebsch, like Caputo, does not let political and social division hold sway over who bears the rights to claim pure non-violence, namely because of the constant threat to classify our others as non-human monsters, ignoring our human commonality. The utter annihilation and destruction of human *morality* here is key, for in these classifications we sever ties with what makes us religious. As Blanchot knew, we are only as strong as our weakest members as a species, and as Levinas believed, this would mean that we bear *unconditional* responsibility and moral resistance to help rectify the disastrous violences "we" commit. Our most disastrous violence removes us

from the realm of the political entirely, destroying the possibility of an immutable order and world by systematically annihilating *our relations* with others. Relations are what make us human. Following Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, we operate – even in inconspicuous ways – with an eliminatory violence that no longer is restricted to the mass annihilation of others as perpetrated in acts of genocide. If we lose our others, even those with whom we are in conflict and even war, we also lose *religio* and the other who “binds us back” to responsibility. “The dead” also play an essential role. With attempts to gas, liquify, or burn up the body of the other come the liquidation of our very humanity *in the name* of destroying the other’s culture because of its failures of morality! “The cultural history of human mortality begins with *the dignification of the dead* as expressed in the act of burial,” and thus to deprive mourners of this keeps them from Levinas’ “primal death” of the other, a death that deserves primacy and unconditional responsibility, even over my own.

Sandra Lehmann inquires into the intrinsic relationship between sovereignty and unconditionality, and like Liebsch, also turns to their intrinsic connection to death. And so, by extension, we can appreciate the implicit claim for how the unconditional, when wed to sovereign power, is a death-dealing power. For this reason, like Habermas and Derrida, she seeks to restrain sovereignty. But where they opt for a post-metaphysical approach, Lehmann seeks a transformed metaphysics – what she calls a “dynamic metaphysics” – that aims for a life beyond sovereignty. Specifically, she sees in the example of Christian martyrdom this form of life that refuses to submit to sovereignty’s unconditional demand. In Lehmann’s words, the Christian martyr represents the permanent possibility of a “life beyond life unto death” – that is, a “life irreducible and unconditioned.” Note carefully her usage of unconditionality and unconditioned: where the former gets linked with death, the latter marks freedom. Sovereignty factors into this equation by the authority it claims over life and death. Expanding upon Carl Schmitt’s classic assertion, the sovereign is not only he who decides upon the exception, but that which may demand death from the living, and thus life under its unconditional power is made into a living death. Even still, by Lehmann’s dynamic metaphysics, there is nevertheless an excess, an inner transcendence, a life beyond life unto death – or, put otherwise, a life chosen, and thus, a conditioned sovereignty that operates by an alternative supreme principle or *arché* beyond that of power and domination. In this way, Lehmann rewrites martyrdom as a choice for life-worth-dying-for over a fate of a living death.

If Lehmann opts for the conditioned over the unconditional, Kelly Oliver argues for the embrace of ambiguity and ambivalence over what, drawing from Julia Kristeva, she calls the “malady of ideality” operative in religious funda-

mentalisms. She looks to Kristeva as a sort of critical supplement and corrective to Freud, specifically where it comes to Freud's famed account of the patricidal origin of civilization and correlative theory of religion. Where Freud emphasizes violence, sacrifice and guilt, Kristeva emphasizes the potential joy of the totemic festival. Where Freud associates totem and taboo with guilt and sublimation, Kristeva insists on the transformative potential of representation. This is more than just a rewriting of the maternal into the exclusivity of Freud's patrilineage, it is also an intervention aimed at curbing religious violence by understanding its source in religious idealization. The argument is that not all forms of sublimation are unhealthy or repressive. On the contrary, sublimation is a necessary and creative act, and may very well "quell rather than incite violence." Representation has the potential to transform drives. And noting how the prefix 're' has been central to Kristeva's development of thought, Oliver shows how the notion of "maternal reliance" functions in connection with notions of rebirth and rebinding to indicate "the interminable processes through which the speaking subject negotiations and renegotiates the wound at the center of the psyche." The wound is real, but it is the re-action and the response that matters. There are no absolutes. The unconditional is an idealized fantasy. And so, we must embrace ambiguity and ambivalence in order to avoid the risks of fundamentalism, dogmatism, and nihilism.

Like Oliver, Carl Raschke is also concerned with explicating the source of violence. And like Oliver, Raschke also engages in a critical rewriting of his own – in this case, it is a rewriting of the philosophical lineage of deconstruction. Raschke offers the clear hint along the way that Francois Lauruelle's non-philosophy gets Derrida and deconstruction wrong insofar as it misses the often latent spirituality of its promissory philosophy. If deconstruction can properly be thought of as a thinking of the impossible, then here Raschke gives definition in what precisely that impossibility consists – namely, how to think Yahweh philosophically. Given his central role as the one who first introduced deconstruction to the theological world, Raschke is uniquely qualified to remind the reader of how deconstruction never was "really about what many fancifully assumed it to be." As he tells it, "Deconstruction was always about turning philosophy inside out." It is not about the un-conditional, but the hetero-conditional, not about the pure origin, but the heterogeneous origin, and so, Raschke writes, "Whether we are Greeks or Jews comes down to where we want to plant our theoretical flags among multiple historical *topoi*." To think Yahweh in a philosophical way indeed requires a thinking "with and within history with all its violence and terror." This, and only this, "would be a true 'philosophical' commentary on the Unnameable Name (יהוה), which would be indistinguishable from living faithfully in history."

Overall, each of the contributions addresses with original insight the subtle yet inextricable points of connection between violence, God, and unconditional claims. Regarding such topics, it seems Leonard Cohen was able to capture in song what we have here sought to give expression in this special issue. Released just before his own death, in his horrifying track “You want it Darker” Cohen takes from the mourner’s *Kaddish*, which “magnifies and glorifies” despite the dark ambivalence of the holy, the death of loved ones, and amidst acceptance of his own coming death. Cohen’s cry of “here I am,” *Hineni* (both the Cantor’s pray on Yom Kippur, and the proclamation by Abraham on Mount Sinai in Genesis 22) confirms unworthiness and readiness, yet also stubborn resistance and taunt: “I’m ready my Lord” and I’m not hiding. This bleak moral responsibility comes despite the “million candles” lit in vain with a frail hope, as we cannot forget this world is a dark place, often of our own making:

*“They’re lining up the prisoners
And the guards are taking aim
I struggled with some demons
They were middle class and tame
I didn’t know I had permission to murder and to maim
You want it darker
We kill the flame”*

Without ignoring culpability, and by turning to his own seemingly pedestrian violences, perhaps we need to learn to claim with Cohen: Maybe you, God, “want it darker” but “we kill the flame.”¹⁰

10 Leonard Cohen, “You Want it Darker”: If you are the dealer, I’m out of the game/If you are the healer, it means I’m broken and lame/If thine is the glory then mine must be the shame/You want it darker/We kill the flame

Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name/Vilified, crucified, in the human frame/A million candles burning for the help that never came/You want it darker/Hineni, hineni/I’m ready, my lord/

There’s a lover in the story/But the story’s still the same/There’s a lullaby for suffering/And a paradox to blame/But it’s written in the scriptures/And it’s not some idle claim/You want it darker/We kill the flame

They’re lining up the prisoners/And the guards are taking aim/I struggled with some demons/They were middle class and tame/I didn’t know I had permission to murder and to maim/You want it darker/Hineni, hineni/I’m ready, my lord

Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name/Vilified, crucified, in the human frame/A million candles burning for the love that never came/You want it darker/We kill the flame

If you are the dealer, let me out of the game/If you are the healer, I’m broken and lame/If thine is the glory, mine must be the shame/You want it darker/Hineni, hineni/Hineni, hineni/I’m ready, my Lord

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