

Written through Blood: The Moral Complexities of Jewish Ritual Circumcision

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Written through Blood

The moral complexities of Jewish ritual circumcision

Na'ama Carlin

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy



School of Social Sciences
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Neonatal male circumcision has been practiced for centuries. Contemporary debate is dominated by those who claim circumcision is necessary for health reasons, and those who argue that it violates autonomy and inflicts harm. Jews are beginning to interrogate their ancient ritual and question whether it is a necessary violence, and whether this violence can be absolved?

The purpose of this dissertation is to consider the relationship between circumcision, violence, and morality. My research problem asks: Because circumcision is violent, does it necessarily mean that circumcision is immoral? Is there another way of conceptualising circumcision that thinks violence differently? In other words, can something that is violent be ethical? My questions are:

1. What is violence? What are the typical features and attributes of violence?
2. What is circumcision and why is it practiced? What moral commitments guide the practice?
3. How does Jewish ritual circumcision reveal the limitations and possibilities of conventional understandings of violence? What implications does Jewish ritual circumcision have for those who consider circumcision as violent and immoral?

To address these questions, I adopt textual method of analysis that is inspired by Jacques Derrida who defines text as a means of accessing the world. This perspective allows me to treat circumcision as a text. I look at three different versions of this text: proponents of circumcision, anti-circumcision activists, and Jewish ritual circumcision. My argument uses different perspectives on violence (such as Sigmund Freud and René Girard, along with Derrida), in addition to a range of Jewish scholarly texts (such as the *Torah*, *Talmud* and a Kabbalistic narrative). I argue that contemporary arguments about circumcision exhibit attributes of division, externality, and inflexible moral values, and my intervention into the debate seeks to explore how we can think of the violence of circumcision beyond opposition or externality. I argue that the Jewish ritual allows us to think of violence as generative, such that there is violence inherent in the making of *text*, and the making of bodies.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Julie and Daniel Carlin, with all my love.

The very incision of circumcision
the wound
is already imbued with - and by - the world.
The body is at once becoming being
so, becoming Jewish, becoming self;
the cut
always unfolding unto itself.

Introduction

First let's make a poem, with blood – Antonin Artaud

In 2007 the documentary filmmaker Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon released a film entitled *Cut: Slicing Through the Myths of Circumcision* (2007). The film is an investigative exploration of the origins, meaning, and attitudes around Jewish ritual circumcision. Specifically, Ungar-Sargon explores the reasons that circumcision has been a persistent feature of Jewish life for millennia. In the film, Ungar-Sargon interviews anthropologists, historians, physicians, traditional Jewish circumcisers, and new parents along with rabbis and other men who have been circumcised for their views on circumcision. Ungar-Sargon's film comes at a time when there is a growing movement of activists – predominantly active in the United States of America, where Ungar-Sargon is based – who protest against all forms of non-medically essential circumcision. These activists argue that circumcision violates both the infant's body and his rights and for these reasons, it is unethical.¹ That the movement is prolific in the USA is worth noting, as routine neonatal circumcision has been common there for several decades.² It would seem that this once unquestioned practice of circumcision, conducted with either religious or secular (that is, non-religious) motivations, is now under scrutiny. Consequently, this has meant that the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision is now increasingly at the forefront of public inquiry.³

¹ I should note that the term 'circumcision' is colloquially used to refer to various procedures, ranging from the circumcision of infant males to the genital modification and cutting of female genitals, male children and adults. In this dissertation, I use the term 'circumcision' in reference to neonatal males unless otherwise specified.

² According to statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) of the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), across the 32-year period from 1979 through 2010, the national rate of newborn circumcision in USA hospitals declined 10 percent overall, from 64.5 percent to 58.3 percent (CDC/NCHS 2013).

³ The Jewish circumcision ritual has attracted attention in New York City for several years due to infant deaths and illness. In 2003 and 2004 the city reported three cases of Type 1 herpes in infants (Robbins 2012). These cases were linked to an aspect of the Jewish circumcision ritual known as *metziza b'peh* – the custom of orally sucking the blood from the infant's newly circumcised penis. New York City health officials have linked *metziza b'peh* to 17 cases of infant herpes since 2000. Two infants died and two others suffered brain damage (Dobnik 2015). These events were the catalyst for a policy put forward by Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration that required parents to sign consent forms before the circumciser could perform *metziza b'peh*. This decision enraged the New York Jewish orthodoxy, many of whom opposed the policy. In early 2015, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio oversaw changes to municipal rules and effectively repealed the Bloomberg-era rule that required parental-consent forms before a ritual circumciser could perform this particular aspect of the procedure (Dawsey 2016). Elsewhere, in South Africa, a Johannesburg Jewish ritual circumciser has been banned from practicing circumcision for life after a baby's penis was partially amputated during a circumcision he performed, according to a commission of inquiry into the June 2014 incident (JTA 2015).

But what exactly is neonatal male circumcision? Simply put, this form of circumcision refers to the procedure that removes the foreskin from an infant's penis. We can bring to mind an image of the event: a figure crouching over an infant, sharp knife severing tender flesh, fingers ripping back skin, the letting of a baby's blood, a surge of tears, drool. A carnal, evocative image. It is not difficult to understand how circumcision can be seen as a violence insofar as it cuts through the infant's body and as some would say, violates it. To the extent that circumcision is a deliberate act of violence it should not come as a surprise that some deem it to be immoral.

The purpose of this thesis is to interrogate the relationship between violence, morality, and circumcision. Because circumcision is violent, does it necessarily mean that circumcision is immoral? Is there another way to conceptualise circumcision that thinks violence differently? My specific focus is the case of Jewish ritual circumcision, a practice that despite its violent nature, has persisted in Jewish culture for millennia. Thus Jewish ritual circumcision offers us a unique opportunity to think about the intersection of violence and morality.

In recent times, burgeoning movements have appeared that scrutinise circumcision from numerous perspectives, and Ungar-Sargon's film is part of this contemporary current of inquiry and reflection.⁴ To illustrate this point, let us now turn to a scene from the film *Cut* (2007) where a conversation between Ungar-Sargon and a rabbi regarding the nature of circumcision takes place. Asked for his thoughts on the matter of circumcision, the Rabbi Hershy Worch looks into the camera and says:⁵

It's painful, it's abusive. It's traumatic, and if anybody who's not in a covenant [with God] does it, I think they should be put in prison. I don't think anybody has an excuse for mutilating a child. ... Depriving them of their glans penis, and... We don't have rights to other people's bodies, and a baby needs to have its rights protected. I think anybody who circumcises a baby is an abuser, doesn't matter. Unless it's absolutely medically advised, where a urologist says that he needs to be circumcised. Otherwise – what for...?⁶

Let's take a moment to unpack the statement: 'It's painful, it's abusive. It's traumatic, and if anybody who's not in a covenant [with God] does it, I think they should be put in prison. I don't think anybody has an excuse for mutilating a child'. These words are striking in their determinacy, even

⁴ One of the film's interviewees is Jewish anthropologist Leonard B. Glick who circumcised his three sons. In the preface to his book *Marked In Your Flesh* (2005), he confesses that had he known 'at their births what I know now, they would never had been circumcised' (Glick 2005: viii). Glick's statement reflects the sense of inquiry and self-reflection regarding circumcision that is increasingly taking place in the Jewish community.

⁵ A rabbi is a Jewish leader, teacher, philosopher and guide. In Hebrew the word rabbi is derived from the word 'rav' (Heb. רב), meaning 'master' or 'teacher'.

⁶ This and all other transcriptions of scenes from the film *Cut: Slicing Through the Myths of Circumcision* (2007 dir. Ungar-Sargon) quoted in this dissertation were conducted by me.

more so because they are uttered by an orthodox Jewish rabbi, a man who has no doubt undergone circumcision himself and attended many others and, as we shall soon see, offers a defence of circumcision.

Several key points stand out. First, according to this rabbi, circumcision is abuse and mutilation. Second, there aren't excuses for mutilating a child. And third, anybody who mutilates a child – even through circumcision – is an abuser who deserves punishment. Curiously, the rabbi furnishes his statement that 'there is no excuse' for mutilating a child with a caveat: *unless* that person is in a covenant with God. This caveat is the only excuse or justification for a procedure that – in the rabbi's words – would otherwise count as 'mutilation'. When considered in light of the third admission – that anyone who mutilates a child is an abuser who deserves imprisonment – this caveat seems particularly meaningful. Indeed, what does this covenant provide, such that it allows the rabbi to practice something that – by his own admission – is abuse? Recall the rabbi's own words: '*I think anybody who circumcises a baby is an abuser, doesn't matter.*' This is an interesting observation. Why does one knowingly practice something they understand to be abusive, and at the same time, deem it moral enough to practice? This raises the question of how we understand violence, and whether violence is always, or necessarily, immoral and unethical. The rabbi's admission evidently raises Ungar-Sargon curiosity because he poses the following question:

So how does this covenant⁷ alleviate your ethical responsibility that you just so articulately posed? How is it that being in this covenant exempts you from that term... How can you not call yourself an abuser?

The rabbi does not circle around an answer, and calmly replies:

I'm an abuser! I do abusive things because I am in covenant with God. And ultimately God owns my morals, he owns my body, he owns my past and future, and that's the meaning of this covenant: that I agreed to ignore the pain and the rights and the trauma of my child to be in this covenant.

This candid confession by the rabbi – 'I'm an abuser!' – is astonishing. Does the rabbi really think he's an abuser? Or, given that circumcision is God's commandment, is God the abuser? Perhaps it is not so simple. One insight we can deduce from this statement (which perceives God as originator, even owner of morality while demanding from his followers to commit a procedure that would otherwise be understood as abuse) is that there is a close link between violence and morality.

I think the conversation between the rabbi and the filmmaker articulates much of the narrative of the contemporary circumcision debate in an abbreviated form. It gives us an indication of the

⁷ Ungar-Sargon is referring here to God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, where circumcision is specified as a condition of the covenant. Chapter 3 explores this Biblical story in more depth.

problematic, yet productive tensions that this thesis takes up between secular and religious approaches to the question of circumcision. In short, this dissertation explores the struggle between a secular understanding of morality (as represented by anti-circumcision activists and pro-circumcision activists) and a religious orientation to morality (as represented by the Jewish approach to circumcision).

This thesis concentrates on an impasse between secular and Jewish approaches to circumcision that is shaped by conflicting moral commitments. I wish to consider the characteristics of violence exhibited by circumcision, and if and when the cut of circumcision might be considered ethical.

Here is the research problem that drives this dissertation:

Because circumcision is violent, does it necessarily mean that circumcision is immoral? Is there another way of conceptualising circumcision that thinks violence differently?

Throughout the dissertation I show that violence – generally perceived in terms of an imposition or act of force imposed upon the self by an external other - typically displays characteristics of causality and externality. Violence is perceived in terms of externality but also opposition (violator – violated and self – other). It is my sense that these notions of externality and opposition are problematic for understanding the moral complexities of Jewish ritual circumcision. At root, I wonder if there is a way for us to think of violence in a way that doesn't rely on externality and opposition. I suggest that moving away from externality and opposition allows us to conceptualise violence as a generative force, one that is tied in with our very being. I take this line of enquiry as way of researching how circumcision – practiced routinely by Jews – can be deemed violent yet permissible, even necessary.

This dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

4. What is violence? What are the typical features and attributes of violence?
5. What is circumcision and why is it practiced? In other words, what moral commitments guide the practice?
6. How does the case of Jewish ritual circumcision reveal the limitations and possibilities of conventional understandings of violence? What implications does Jewish ritual circumcision have for those who consider circumcision as violent and immoral?

This thesis has three aims:

1. To review approaches to violence and to determine its attributes.
2. To consider the debate between pro- and anti-circumcision groups to determine what moral commitments inform their views.
3. To use the case of Jewish ritual circumcision to challenge conventional understandings of the violence of circumcision and to intervene into the debate about circumcision.

In what follows, I outline the popular terms of contemporary circumcision debate. My focus is the Jewish ritual of circumcision, but because the contemporary circumcision debate bleeds into the millennia-old practice of Jewish ritual circumcision, I want to consider what these contemporary groups stand for. There are two stakeholder groups that represent ‘secular positions’ on circumcision (that is positions that are not strictly informed by religion). On the one hand, there are pro-circumcision activists who perceive circumcision as a necessary act for medical reasons. Circumcision activists view circumcision through a lens of medical research. For them, health is a moral imperative. Hence circumcision – argued as being a vital medical procedure to promote public and individual health – is perceived in resolutely positive terms. On the other hand, anti-circumcision activists argue that circumcision is a violent infringement of the child’s body and autonomy. Such an argument relies on the notion that the body *prior* to circumcision is a whole, integral body. The body is that which is intervened into, cut, and compromised through the process of circumcision, a procedure that is viewed in resolutely negative terms. My intervention sets out to challenge these positions that view circumcision in either positive or negative terms. I propose that coming to a moral standpoint on circumcision isn’t as straightforward as pro- and anti-circumcision activists suggest. That is, I want to argue that it is entirely possible that we might not be able to determine whether circumcision is a moral or immoral practice, especially once we consider all the elements at play with Jewish ritual circumcision. My attempt here is to problematise circumcision and to trouble the opposition between violence and morality.

The conflicting views pro- and anti-circumcision groups have on circumcision puts them at an impasse. My method for challenging this impasse is to treat perspectives on circumcision as texts. In other words, they can be analysed and read as texts. To this end, my dissertation utilises for its analysis a textual method.

Before we go on, I should explain what I mean by ‘texts’. For the purpose of this dissertation, *text* refers to bodies of knowledge and subjects of investigation that we can interrogate and study as texts. So I use text not strictly in the conventional sense as textbooks or articles, but rather as what gives us access to the world and makes meaning. Etymologically, *text* has Latin and French roots. It comes to mean ‘the wording of anything written or printed’ but is also a participle of *texere*, which means *to weave* (OED Online text, n.: 2016). Thus we can think of text as that which is woven, interweaved, or braided together. This indicates to us that in the same way one cannot braid a single thread, a *text* is not singular, and this is true for my project too. On the issue of circumcision, the tapestry of this

dissertation is woven with three primary threads: anti-circumcision activists, pro-circumcision activists, and Judaism.

My dissertation treats three primary texts, which are in turn divided into areas of focus. The first text is *circumcision*, which is also my case study. The text of circumcision is divided into three threads: pro-circumcision, anti-circumcision, and Jewish circumcision. Secondly, I treat *theory* as text. Again, my theory is divided into three components: violence theory, the theory of Jacques Derrida, and Judaic scholarship. The third text I treat is *the body*. Specifically the Jewish male body. I elaborate on these texts below, beginning with circumcision.

Circumcision as text: Judaism

I treat circumcision as text, but the specific case I focus on is Jewish ritual circumcision. A rite of passage in Judaism, circumcision is an event of transformation that initiates the newborn male into Jewish male lineage.⁸ This dissertation also plays on the Hebrew name of the circumcision ritual, which is *Brit Milah*. *Brit* means ‘Covenant’, and *Milah* is a homonym that means both ‘circumcision’ and ‘word’. My dissertation conceptualises Jewish circumcision as both a cut on the body, and a word on the body, and this is another reason why the terminology of ‘text’ is relevant to the themes of this dissertation. For if we are to think of circumcision as word (*milah*) then it too is a text, and it is meaningful, or conversely – full of meaning. However, there are other discursive approaches to circumcision, which I refer to as ‘secular approaches’. These are pro-circumcision activists and anti-circumcision activists. Let us consider each in turn.

Circumcision as text: Circumcision activists

Pro-circumcision activists advocate for circumcision as an essential medical procedure, and mobilise their arguments about circumcision through a language that revolves around health. Here, circumcised bodies are viewed through a lens of medical research. As I go on to show, circumcision activists point to various studies that suggest circumcision is an effective tool in combating the spread of HIV and other sexually transmissible infections, and some even cite the benefits of circumcision in terms of reducing the chances of penile cancer and urinary tract infections among infants.

⁸ Incidentally, male converts to Judaism of any age must also undergo circumcision as part of their conversion process. If the convert happens to already be circumcised, he must undergo a process called *hatafat dam brit* (translated to ‘the letting of the blood of the covenant’), which is essentially a pinprick on the glans penis in order to draw blood.

Circumcision activists frame their arguments around health as a moral value; hence they perceive circumcision to be a public health imperative and moral obligation.

Circumcision as text: Intactivists

Anti-circumcision activists are known as intactivists, so named as they are on a mission to leave genitals (and foreskins) intact. Intactivists argue that circumcision violates the child's autonomy which, for them, is a prominent moral principle. 'Autonomy' as a political concept was popularised by the late nineteenth century British political philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873). Mill's text *On Liberty* ([1859] 1975) is concerned with the question of society's power over the individual, and with the question of what degree of liberty can one be afforded in order for individuals to exercise autonomy and self-governance. Such questions were significant for Mill for he viewed autonomy as intrinsic for personal wellbeing. Following Mill's emphasis on autonomy as constitutive of wellbeing, his political theory argued that the principles of social and political power structures are factors in ensuring individuals' welfare. Thus for Mill the purpose of liberty was to protect citizens from the tyranny of the political rulers and foster individual autonomy (1975: 3).⁹ There is a degree of liberty from decisions by a governing or controlling power and indeed, Mill is concerned with a 'fitting adjustment between individual independence and social control' (1975: 6). Thus values of liberalism and autonomy are inextricably linked. This leads us to a conventional definition of 'liberal' offered by Richard Shweder:¹⁰ '[a] liberal is a person who has a moral taste for any way of life (whether familial, social or political) that encourages and enables persons endowed with reason and free will to lead their lives according to their ideals' (Shweder 2009: 250). Thus liberal societies are structured around the notion of individual choice and autonomy to exercise that choice. Problems arise when individual freedoms clash, as they inevitably do. Intactivist arguments are organised around the notion of autonomy as a moral principle as they claim that only the individual is entitled to make decisions regarding their own body and life. Before we continue, I want to highlight briefly the clashes between the three groups. For intactivists, autonomy as a guiding moral principle means parents should not force circumcision on their infants. For activists, health as a

⁹ For Mill, the political ruling class should be identified with the people and their needs. What matters is the will of the people, not the will of the rulers. But here too Mill identifies a limitation, for when we speak of the will of the people, we refer to the majority of people, 'the people, consequently, may desire to oppress a party of their numbers; and precautions are as much needed against this as any other abuse of power' (1975: 5). Thus while holders of power are accountable to the public, they are accountable to the majority who also holds strong power. This, Mill argues, is 'the tyranny of the majority' (1975: 6).

¹⁰ Richard Shweder is an American cultural anthropologist known for his work on robust pluralism and the scope of tolerance for diversity in multicultural societies.

moral principle means they argue that parents have a moral obligation to circumcise their infants. The impasse between intactivists and activists becomes wider when we consider the Jewish position, where circumcision is a commandment from God and a rite of passage that initiates the newborn male into Jewish male lineage.

At this point it is worth noting that my dissertation is concerned with neonatal male circumcision, and does not consider other forms of genital modification such as intersex children's genital reassignment surgery or female genital modification (FGM), as these are complex issues that go beyond our scope here.¹¹¹²

We previously discussed the text of circumcision, and now we've come to the other texts my dissertation treats: theory, and the body. My theoretical texts are divided into theories of violence, the theories of Jacques Derrida, and Judaism. My treatment of the body as text focuses on the male member upon which circumcision takes place. Let us consider each in turn, beginning with violence.

¹¹ A variety of terms are used to categorise people with intersex conditions that exhibit external genitalia that are different from the majority of male and females and abnormal chromosomal formation (Heath 2009; MacKenzie, Huntington and Gilmour 2009). The complexity of issues surrounding intersex genital surgeries is rooted in evolving societal approaches and medical approaches to 'normal' anatomy, gender and sex, hence one suggestion is that the motivation for intersex surgeries seems to be socio-cultural, rather than medical (Svoboda 2012: 9; Heath 2009). In fact, there is a sizable literature in medical ethics that advocates for the deferral of non-medically necessary intersex surgeries (Earp 2015; Svoboda 2013). It is beyond the scope of this project to consider intersex surgeries because the nature of the discussion diverges from our specific interests.

¹² The complexity of this issue is evidenced in the range of practices of female genital modification (FGM), ranging from rites of passage into womanhood, to cosmetic and aesthetic reasons. The modification of female genitals in non-traditional societies, for instance in Australia, is called 'labiaplasty'. It is a surgical procedure to remove or reduce the labia minora and/or the labia majora (the inner and outer lips of the vagina respectively). According to Australian Medicare statistics, over the past 10 years in Australia medical rebates for labiaplasty and vulvoplasty (surgical remodelling of the vulva) have risen from 640 claims in 2000-01 to 1565 in 2010-11, although the actual number of procedures is thought to be much more. With respect to female genital modification (FGM), there are variations of the practice (Khaja et al. 2009: 729-730). The WHO has classified these operations into four types (WHO 1995). Type I involves the excision of the clitoral hood with a partial or total removal of the clitoris. Type II refers to the removal of the prepuce and clitoris together with partial or total excision of the labia minora. Type III is commonly known as infibulation or pharaonic circumcision and refers to the removal of all or part of the external genitalia and stitching or narrowing of the vaginal opening. Type IV is refers to any other traditional genital surgeries such as pricking, piercing, or incising the clitoris and/or labia, scraping, cutting, or stretching the clitoris and/or surrounding tissues, or introducing corrosive substances into the vagina to cause bleeding with the aim of narrowing the vagina (WHO 1995). It is estimated that around 130 million women across the globe have undergone female genital modification, and that every year around 2 million women and girls will be subjected to these procedures (Morison et al. 2001; Toubia 1996). Western feminism has generally framed female genital modification as a barbaric and mutilating practice (see Hosken 1993). North American and European feminist activists and academics have long voiced their views on the modification of female genitalia (for example Nussbaum 1998; Hosken 1993) while others have challenged the hegemony of traditional Western feminist approaches to female genital modification (see for example Smith 2011 and Kirby 1987).

Theory as text: Violence

My research treats violence as a text to be studied. In what follows, I show how other theorists have considered violence and in what terms. Let us start with the German Sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky (2003), who is curious as to what causes people to behave violently. Can we say that causes of violence are circumstantial, such as low-socio economic status, or behavioural, such as a tendency for rage or belligerence? Or is it the case that humans have a propensity for violence, and why? These are some of the questions Sofsky explores in his treatise *Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War* (2003). I am particularly interested in Sofsky's discussion of ritual violence. As Sofsky explains, hunting, war, and sacrifice are the oldest forms of violence, and were often practiced or performed as rituals (Sofsky 2003: 24). As ritual violence is one of the oldest forms of violence, it must be a useful clue in identifying what drives violence. Ritual violence has a particular cultural and social function, Sofsky argues, as it is 'a way of creating community spirit' (Sofsky 2003: 25). Put simply, rituals of sacrifice and murder are communal acts that engender a sense of community, a shared experience, and establish bonds of loyalty (Sofsky 2003: 25). Furthermore, 'our fear of death engenders a need for security, durability, immortality' (Sofsky 2003: 8). And so, communal bonding over ritual violence works as a response to this fear and desire for security. Not only is violence a constant feature of human societies, but our propensity for violence is a reaction that we have developed and evolved as a response to our own mortality. In a curious twist then, violence can serve as a reminder of our very humanity, mortality, and life.

But violence is also a philosophical concern. Indeed, violence is a sprawling motif in contemporary theory, suggests Ann Murphy (2012). Philosophy, theory, and cultural critique are invested in violence to varying degrees: from Nietzsche's explorations of beyond good and evil to Levinas's descriptions of history and violence, and to Derrida, whose discussions of violence – as we shall see later on – are rooted in canonical biblical texts. To briefly reflect on Murphy's contributions: instead of proffering detailed and lengthy interpretations of philosophers, Murphy addresses violence by identifying themes that often evoke images of violence and then links them to points of contact with feminist thought. Murphy's project claims that 'images of violence assume a certain priority in the philosophical imaginary' (Murphy 2012: 7). Further, Murphy claims:

In line with the recognition that violence is an unavoidable aspect of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, and ethics, one might argue that to write on violence is simply to reinstitutionalise the violence of writing itself, such that a project like this one is doomed to reproduce a kind of violence without end, as its queries will never break with the fundamental violence of critique, of writing, of reason. How does one write on violence when writing itself constitutes violence? (2012: 7 - 8).

In this passage, Murphy identifies a pertinent concern: insofar as violence is ‘an unavoidable aspect of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, and ethics’, to theorise violence consequently risks reproducing a certain kind of violence. This is indeed a risk, but it is also an unavoidable endeavour.

Another theorist who addresses violence is Paul Ricoeur, who considers the foundational violence that underpins human behaviour and societal patterns. As Ricoeur states in ‘Fragile Identity’ (2011): ‘it is a fact that there is no historical community that is not born out of what we may say is an original relationship to war’ and further on ‘marks of violence are evident everywhere. At the level of the individual, it is the persistence of the spirit of revenge at the heart of the spirit of justice’ (Ricoeur 2011: 87). Ricoeur takes the line of political philosophy as he explains that the State curtails the spirit of revenge as it disarms its citizens by denying them the option of taking justice into their own hands and asserting their revenge.¹³ What’s more, Ricoeur considers how violence and identity converge when he writes about ‘experiencing the other as a menace’, which brings the fragility of identity to the surface. Ricoeur argues that this sense of menace is derived from our encounter with the other: ‘It is a fact that the other, because she or he is other, comes to be seen as a danger for true identity - our collective identity as much as my own identity’ (Ricoeur 2011: 84). Ricoeur is suggesting here that the other poses a threat to the ‘true’ nature of our identity. In a sense, this line of argument is similar to that put forward by intactivists who see bodies as ‘true’ and ‘complete’ things that are threatened by external ‘others’. Elsewhere in his essay ‘Violence and Language’ (1975), Ricoeur addresses the points of contact of violence and language. Ricoeur argues that violence and language are the opposites of each other. This is because Ricoeur frames languages in terms of speech, discussion, reason, and rationality. For Ricoeur, language is an attempt to reduce violence: ‘It is for a being who speaks, who in speaking pursues meaning, who has already entered the discussion and who knows something about rationality that violence is or becomes a problem. Thus violence has its meaning in its other: language. And the same is true reciprocally’ (Ricoeur 1975: 33). A violence that speaks, that enters the orbit of language and reason, is thus a violence that is beginning to ‘negate itself as violence’ (Ricoeur 1975: 33). To enter the realm of language, discussion, speech and reason requires one to leave their weapon at the door (Ricoeur 1975: 33). Even though I don’t discuss Murphy and Ricoeur at length, they are useful as an introduction to the problem of violence because

¹³ Ricoeur’s argument continues as follows: the State takes justice into its own hands with the right to exercise State sanctioned ‘so-called legitimate’ violence (Ricoeur 2011: 87). This is because any punishment, regardless of how suited it is to its offence or crime ‘adds yet more suffering to what has already been inflicted by the aggressor’ (Ricoeur 2011: 87). An example Ricoeur offers here is the death penalty, which continues to be practiced in many states that deem themselves to be democratic. Ricoeur concludes that ‘the practice of violent death has not been wiped out from our lawful states’ (Ricoeur 2011: 87).

they introduce us to the notion that violence underpins human behaviour and societal patterns, and is thus an unavoidable aspect of life.

Theory as text: Jacques Derrida

The second theoretical text I treat belongs to the corpus of Jacques Derrida. My choice of theorist was anything but arbitrary: first, Derrida's intervention to the notion of 'text' has significant bearing for my own work; and second, Derrida, a Jewish man, was circumcised in infancy and indeed wrote a book on his circumcision titled *Circumfession* (1993).¹⁴ Thus Derrida is useful here for two reasons: he has bearing on both text (and writing), and circumcision. Let us consider Derrida first in relation to text, and then, on circumcision.

Derrida and text

Derrida argues that there are two ways to think of text. First, text in the standard sense is something that is made or constructed (for example, a book, a legal document, a sheet of musical notes). But not all things have this material, *written* existence. There are other things in the world that are *not* constructed or made, but simply *are* (for instance, justice, knowledge, truth, being, hospitality, responsibility). Traditionally text is a *representation* of these things that *are*. But Derrida challenges the conventional notion that text is to be understood only as representation, and that text, words, and symbols function as signifiers of something *other* without any inherent meaning beyond what they signify.¹⁵ For Derrida, text is everything which would otherwise be placed in the category of the 'simply is'. In Derrida's words: 'What I call "text" implies all the structures called "real," "economic," "historical," "socio-institutional,"' (Derrida 1988: 148). Conventionally 'text' refers to symbols – or signifiers – of referents which means that text and language are themselves devoid of meaning *without* referents.¹⁶ For Derrida, however, text implies all the elements and structures that we consider 'real'. Thus, for Derrida, we are not able to gain direct access to the world independently of the different ways in which we talk about it and act on it.

¹⁴ *Circumfession* (1993) is one part of a collaborative project entitled *Jacques Derrida* (1993) undertaken by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida. For ease of referencing, I treat *Circumfession* as an independent text.

¹⁵ In his book *Of Grammatology*, Derrida famously stated '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' – 'There is no outside-text' (Derrida 1997: 158). What does this curious statement, which effectively posits that nothing is outside of text, actually mean? Put simply, it means that there is no 'outside' of the text for things that simply exist, simply *are*. But we must be cautious here and note that Derrida does not intend to reduce the whole world to language.

¹⁶ Seeking to subvert this conventional view, Derrida develops the following theory: signifiers acquire meaning through their *difference* from one another (so, a tree is not the same as a horse), each signifier points to a signified, whose meaning in turn comes to point to another signifier, and so on such that language does not have a halting point. Meaning is always being sought after, and language is a continuous movement of differences.

Derrida and circumcision

The second text of Derrida's I want to consider relates to his circumcision, and here I refer to text in the conventional text (work of writing) but also in the Derridean sense – as a way of thinking about the world. Derrida was preoccupied with his circumcision, a statement evidenced throughout the pages of *Circumfession* (1993), which is a text composed of 59 paragraphs that correlate to Derrida's age at the time of writing. This relation between age and page, between sentence and life, is anything but accidental. Throughout *Circumfession*, Derrida records his inner-dialogue on the influential inscription of circumcision present in his own body. He analogises circumcision with writing, and thus with creating. For Derrida, circumcision is theorised as a cut that doubles as word. Or in Derrida's own words: 'Circumcision...the writing of the body' (Derrida 1993: 70). We must acknowledge that the word 'of' here alludes to a body that is being written into being. The fact that one cannot erase this inscription (as the scar of circumcision remains on the body) is significant, particularly considering Derrida's own negation of belonging to a community.¹⁷ The themes in Derrida's writing on his circumcision are very close to the themes in this dissertation.

Theory as text: Judaic Scholarship

We now come to our third and final theory text, Judaic scholarship. Here too I treat text in a Derridean sense, as a means of accessing the world, and so I concentrate on three aspects of Judaic scholarship: the *Torah*,¹⁸ the *Talmud*,¹⁹ and Kabbalistic narratives. Because of my approach to *text*, I want to note that 'text' has multiple meanings in the context of Judaic Scholarship. First, there is the meaning of text as discourse, in accordance with which we can understand circumcision. Second, there is text as word, language, and also text as pregnant with mystical meaning (something I expand on in Chapters 4 and 5). Judaism is a religion of text, reading, and writing. Much of Jewish life pivots around the study of Jewish texts, not only in the capacity of ritual prayer, but also debate and philosophy. Such texts do not only define Jewish life, they enable it. One exemplar of mystical text that enables Jewish life is the view that the *Torah* – the holiest Jewish text – is God's blueprint in

¹⁷ In *Circumfession* Derrida describes himself as 'little black and very Arab Jew' (1993: 58), signaling some of the struggles he experienced in adolescence, growing up as an Algerian Jew with French citizenship. Derrida had at different stages of his life felt excluded, whether forced – such as with being expelled from school as a result of institutionalised anti-Semitism and having his French citizenship revoked as a child as a consequence of French-Algerian politics, or as a result of conflicting environments whereby Christianity was the dominate religious tradition.

¹⁸ The *Torah* (the Hebrew Bible) known as the Five Books of Moses, the Pentateuch, and The Written Law, is the encompassing compilation of Judaism's founding legal and ethical religious texts.

¹⁹ The *Talmud* is the encompassing compilation of Judaism's founding legal, ethical, and religious texts, peppered with rabbinical commentaries on a vast collection of Jewish laws and traditions.

creation (Ginzburg 1998; Chaim 1990). Thus according to Jewish cosmogony the *Torah* preceded creation, as God ‘was looking at it [at the Torah] creating the world’ (Dan 1996: 228). We could also say that God created the world with his words, as it is said in Genesis: ‘God said, ‘Let there be light’, and there was light’²⁰ (Genesis 1: 3). The thread I want to tease out here is that language and creation in Judaism are strongly linked, for the world was created by the word of God, by his utterances. Not only then did language precede creation; it also preceded human beings and their communicative needs (Dan 1996: 228). It becomes clear to us already that in Judaism, language is not just a sprawling motif but it exhibits a primary, even *ontological* nature, as the history of the Jew – and the world – pivots on God’s words and the *Torah*. To be clear, I do not propose that this Jewish cosmological lore is factual or real. However, I do suggest that we cannot disentangle the meaning of Jewish ritual circumcision from its religious roots. Because I develop an argument that demonstrates that the cut of circumcision doubles as word it is helpful to take into consideration how Judaism treats the concept of ‘text’.

The body as text

The final text this dissertation studies is *the body*, and for the purposes of my research, the penis is a text to be studied. In treating the body as text, I follow a discipline of theorists who contribute to sociological theories of the body, such as the Australian-British Sociologist Bryan Turner,²¹ the British sociologist Chris Shilling²² and his long-term collaborator Philip Mellor,²³ Nick Crossley²⁴ and the Canadian feminist scholar Barbara Marshall.²⁵

²⁰ When quoting Biblical passages I use one of two Bibles. Generally, I quote from *The New English Bible: The Old Testament* (1970), as it is the more ubiquitous version. At times when our discussion requires more specificity, in particular with respect to certain nuance of the Hebrew language, I quote from *The Torah: with Ramban's commentary – Bereishis/Genesis*. This version, part of the ArtScroll Series published by Mesorah, is translated, annotated and elucidated with commentary by the Ramban (known in English as Nahmanides).

²¹ Bryan Turner is the founding editor of the journal *Body & Society*, established in 1995; author of texts such as *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology* (2002); and has edited various other collections such as *Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body* (Turner, Featherstone and Hepworth 1996) and the *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies* (2012).

²² Chris Shilling’s interest lies in questions around embodiment and its significance in studies of society. One of the pertinent aspects of Shilling’s research is his curiosity about the interactions that occur between embodied subjects and their environments. Some of Shilling’s major books are *Changing Bodies: Habit, Crisis and Creativity* (2008), *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society* (2005), he has edited the collection *Embodying Sociology: Retrospect, Progress and Prospects* (2007), and together with Philip A. Mellor, co-authored books such as *Re-forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity* (1997) and *The Sociological Ambition* (2001).

²³ In addition to being a long-term collaborator of Shilling, Mellor is interested in critical analyses of sociological and cultural theory as a method of developing theoretical accounts of society and social phenomena such as religion, secularisation, and citizenship (see for example Shilling and Mellor 2001; Mellor 2004; Mellor and Shilling 2014; Mellor and Shilling 1997).

Many feminist theorists also work in the area of the body, disciplines that are often interlinked, as Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick explain: ‘feminism has long seen its own project as intimately connected with the body’²⁶ (Price and Shildrick (1999: 1). Notable feminists who write on the intersection of body, theory and culture are Judith Butler (1989, 1999a, 1999b) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994) but even more recently, there has been a sense that feminism can also make contributions to analyses of male bodies as well as female bodies.²⁷ One particularly relevant example is Marie Fox and Michael Thomson’s article ‘Foreskin is a Feminist Issue’ (2009). There, the authors contend that although debate around the ethics and legality of non-therapeutic male circumcision has grown in recent years, such discussions tend to be dominated by cost-benefit analyses of male circumcision juxtaposed alongside contested medical evidence. Fox and Thomson propose to discuss male circumcision in a dialogue that engages matters of embodiment and cultural practices. Specifically, the purpose of their article is to ‘highlight the relevance of routine neonatal circumcision for feminist objectives’ (Fox and Thomson 2009: 206) and encourage debate along these lines.

Fox and Thomson make a direct correlation between circumcision and identity when they say that ‘[b]y literally inscribing particular identity/ies on the infant male body, circumcision can be understood as a normalising technology which validates particular forms of body modification’ (2009: 196). Implied in this quote is the idea that identities are inscribed. Ostensibly, this may mean that someone or something must be doing the inscribing. In other words, and this is a point I draw out in my dissertation, identities are not singular, and we can think of identities and bodies as always in process of *becoming*.

²⁴ Nick Crossley works at the intersection of philosophy and sociology by drawing on Merleau-Pontean phenomenology and sociological theory such as Marcel Mauss’s ‘body techniques’ and Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ (see Crossley 2004, 2005, 2007, 2001a, 2001b, 1996, 1995).

²⁵ Barbara Marshall is a sociologist whose recent work explores constructions of masculinities and embodiment in sociological theory (Marshall and Witz 2003).

²⁶ Price and Shildrick intimate at accepted (at least in Western intellectual domains, following the work of Descartes) dualisms such as culture/nature, mind/body, and male/female whereby the male is associated with the privileged culture, education, and mind and the female is associated with the carnal, the organic, and nature (dirt, blood, soil, body). There is an established connection in Western theory between nature-body-female; hence feminists have considered the body as deeply connected with their project of equal rights and representation.

²⁷ The first time I presented my research was at a feminist-oriented conference. At the end of my talk, a woman stood up and enquired as to why I chose to research male circumcision when women and girls undergo arguably worse forms of genital modification. I still stand by my answer, which was: the foundations of theories of the body are men writing about (mostly men’s but at times women’s) bodies. It’s now the time of feminist theorists to ‘return the gaze’ and write about men. I acknowledge the incredible contributions of feminist theorists to sociology of the body and embodiment, many of who spearheaded the use of deconstruction as a methodological tool of sociological inquiry (see for example Kirby 2011, 1997; Armour 1999; Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, and Fraser 1995; Cixous and Clément 1986; Bordo 1987).

Feminism opens a dialogue regarding bodies and embodiment, whereby bodies are malleable, transformable sites of identity. Bodies are considered in terms of social influences, with questions about how society and culture influence the very physicality of the body. Importantly, because of the focus feminist theory has given to the bodies and experiences of women, male bodies have been peripheral in these discussions. It is my intention here to draw from a heritage of feminist theorising of the body as a site of identity and meaning, and to consider the body of the Jewish male in these terms.

Thesis argument

Broadly conceived, violence is the intrusion of an external other upon the self. Thus, violence exhibits the following attributes: externality, and opposition: self - other, violator - violated. I argue that this conceptualisation of violence has Manichaean attributes, namely because of its reliance on binarism. Such a conception of violence tends to exhibit an oppositional structure in relation to morality. Moreover, it tends to rely on a sense of externality.²⁸ The language of Manichaean violence is such that it evokes a certain kind of response that many of us are familiar with, namely: it conjures a moral response against violence. I argue that if we are to use morality as means to respond to violence, then morality is already embedded within violence itself. Rather than morality being necessarily external to violence, and serving as a response to it, I propose that violence and morality can be mutually constitutive. Indeed, the Manichaean framework enables us to consider violence in a certain way, within certain parameters, and relevant to certain scenarios, but I argue that Manichaean approaches to violence should not exhaust our conception of what violence is. I draw on Jacques Derrida to tease out the theme of violence in his work and to formulate a supplementary notion of violence that is characterised by a violence that relates to existence, the violence of being. This violence is not necessarily a causal happening, and in that it is related to existence, to being, it resists definition through binary oppositions.

I argue that contemporary arguments on circumcision exhibit Manichaean qualities. First we have activists and intactivists on either side of the binary, and strong convictions that circumcision is either

²⁸ The philosopher and revolutionary Frantz Fanon promulgated the concept 'Manichaeism' in his critiques of colonialism and post-colonialism studies. In *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2004) Fanon writes 'The colonial world is a Manichaean world' (Fanon 2004: 6). It is a structure that relies on, cultivates, and perpetuates a division between the (colonising) intruder and the *othered* or alienated self (colonised). Here the self is *othered* because power, control and domination lie with the intruding force. The colonising power physically limits the space of the colonised through mechanisms of law and order, while the colonised society is portrayed as a society sans values (Fanon 2004: 6). The principle 'it's them or us' is precisely the organisation of Manichaeism and the Manichaean world (Fanon 2004: 42).

good or bad. I argue that for intactivists, circumcision cuts away at the flesh, and infringes on the right of a child to a ‘whole’ or ‘uncut’ body. The moral value guiding intactivists is ‘autonomy’. In contrast, circumcision activists understand the body in terms of needing circumcision as a supplement that helps curate better health for the child. The moral value guiding activists is ‘health’. These conflicting moral values render us at an impasse because each group is convinced in the legitimacy of its claims. My intervention into the debate seeks to explore how we can think of the violence of circumcision in terms other than opposition or externality. Concentrating on the case study of Jewish ritual of circumcision, we are able to think of violence as generative, such that there is violence inherent in the making of *text*, the making of meaning, and the making of bodies.

My argument proceeds as follows.

Chapter 1 sets out to understand how violence is conceptualised by key thinkers in social theory. What characterises violence? And what characteristics do the theories of violence that I consider share? I want to determine the extent to which these theorists can help me develop a notion of violence that can function as a thematic lens through which we can explore and problematise moral concerns about circumcision. In this chapter I propose a concept of ‘Manichaeism violence’. I use ‘Manichaeism’ heuristically as means to tease out characteristics of contemporary theories of violence. I argue that they contain both a dualistic notion of self and other, and a dualism of moral behaviour and immoral conduct. This chapter discusses Sigmund Freud’s thesis in *Totem and Taboo* of primordial violence as a catalyst for and shaper of social structure and religion. I then consider some of the key themes in René Girard’s work with a focus on sacrifice, ritual, and the concept of victim as anchor points in the overall discussion on violence. I argue that Freud and Girard’s treatment of violence can be described as *ontology of violence*. This concept exhibits the following characteristics: violence displays a logic of causality as either catalyst or outcome of an event. In the final section of the chapter, I use the work of Jacques Derrida to replace the concept of ‘ontology of violence’ with a concept of the ‘violence of ontology’, which is characterised by a violence that is related to existence, the violence of being. It is not necessarily a causal happening, and in that it is related to existence and to being it resists definition through binary oppositions.

Chapter 2 looks at the terms of the contemporary circumcision debate, spearheaded by intactivists and activists. In this chapter I discuss arguments put forward by circumcision activists and intactivists, and outline the terms of the current circumcision debate. We consider how circumcision became such common practice in secular communities, and how it came to dominate medical ethics. I argue that the positions of circumcision activists and intactivists are distilled into a ‘trump card’ that is held

in such regard that it effectively trumps opposing arguments. For circumcision activists this trump is ‘health’, and for intactivists it is ‘autonomy’. This chapter studies activist and intactivist positions, as well as offers a helpful background on the popularity of neonatal circumcision as a medical procedure, the controversies around it, and the subsequent intactivist response. As I will show, a key point of difference between religious and secular stakeholders is in their conceptualisation of violence.

In Chapter 3 we turn our focus on Jewish ritual circumcision. We begin by analysing its Biblical origin, and study some key components of the Jewish circumcision ritual such as the requirement that it take place on the eighth day and the aspect of naming. My purpose in this chapter is to draw links between circumcision and Jewish identity, as a measure of revealing the complex landscape of Jewish ritual circumcision and points of friction with activist and intactivist positions. Also in this chapter I plant the following seed: following from its Hebrew name *Brit Milah* (Covenant of Circumcision/Word) circumcision is linguistically meaningful. By this I mean that the linguistic elements of circumcision elevate the ritual from being simply a rite of passage to something much more: the linguistics of circumcision is meaningful for the *becoming* of Jewish male identity.

Chapter 4 picks up the threads of our discussion on violence to consider if we might move away from a Manichaean framework that uses stark and dualistic categories of good and bad, towards a more nuanced view of violence with respect to circumcision. In this chapter, we turn to Judaism in order to forge a new way of conceptualising the relationship between violence and circumcision. This chapter is organised around the notion of *text*, which is a running thread in this dissertation. One of the concerns of this chapter is to make links between writing and identity, words and body. In order to do so, this chapter analyses how writing and authorship are treated in the works of Jacques Derrida, the primary theorist in this thesis, and Judaic scholarship. My aim is to show that circumcision can be thought of as generative, as a form of writing that entwines identity and creation. In essence, this chapter challenges the idea of an external agent (indeed author) who exercises violence, a central tenet of Manichaean violence.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the notion that circumcision is not *just* a cut (in the pathological sense) but also a writing of *milah* (word) on the body. One of the implications of writing word on the body is that bodies are textual in the full meaning of the word. But such bodies are not stagnant, they are ever changing, and in a sense, *text* too is also dynamic insofar as its meaning changes with every reader. This chapter develops the concept of ‘cut’ as a conceptual alternative to ‘circumcision’, a term that is loaded with moral connotations. We also consider Kabbalistic exegesis in order to

elaborate the links between writing, creation, and violence so as to illustrate how the idea of the ‘cut’ is inherently generative, and unites rather than divides. Finally, we return to Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession* where I distinguish three distinct modes of circumcision: as covenant, as cut, and as word. This distinction helps me to argue that the cut of circumcision is a *making whole*. To this extent, we can concede that circumcision is certainly violent. At the same time, we can understand that this violence is *generative*, is *productive*, and is linked with the creation of bodies in general, of Jewish men in particular and the Jewish community as a whole. I seek to argue that the cut of circumcision is *both* violent *and* generative, moral *and* immoral – it is neither one nor the other. This argument enables me to *problematise* intactivist and activist perceptions of circumcision as either/or, that is - *either* a moral imperative *or* profoundly immoral.

Finally, Chapter 6 serves as the conclusion to this dissertation and offers some final remarks on the morality of the cut of circumcision. We discuss a recent Israeli court case where the mother was court ordered to circumcise her baby. The court case in question exemplifies various discussions held throughout this thesis, namely: the complexity of coming to a determined moral decision on circumcision, the intrinsic connection between circumcision and identity, the tension and clash of views between opponents and proponents of circumcision, and that circumcision is a broad community issue, as well as an individual one. I argue that the Jewish circumcised man is always already bound to others through his body, bound to all the divisions that make up the human, and to all the similarities that make up the Jewish male, to the extent we could say that circumcision produces bodies.

Chapter 1. Morality and the Primordial Moment of Violence

Introduction

One of the goals in this chapter is to understand how violence is conceptualised by key thinkers in social theory. What characterises violence, and what characteristics do the theories of violence that I consider share? I want to determine the extent to which these theorists can help me develop a notion of violence that can function as a thematic lens through which we can explore and problematise moral concerns around circumcision.

As we will see, in this chapter I propose a concept of ‘Manichaean violence’. Manichaeism was a major religion formed in the third century premised on a moral struggle between good versus evil. As a socio-political concept it was popularised by revolutionary Frantz Fanon circa mid-twentieth century in his scathing writings on colonialism and post-colonialism.²⁹ I use ‘Manichaeism’ heuristically as a means to tease out the characteristics of contemporary theories of violence. I argue that these theories contain both a dualistic notion of self and other, and a dualism of moral behaviour and immoral conduct. The effect is to equate immoral conduct with external violence. The resulting tendency of this Manichaean – or dualistic – frame of mind that prevailed during the twentieth century was the attempt to construe violence as being – according to theorists Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber: ‘the intrusion of an external other upon whatever group, institution, or category one chooses to identify with. Violence, in short, has been widely understood as violation of the self-same in its purity by an external other’ (de Vries and Weber 1997: 1). The attributes of violence as the intrusion of an *external other* resonate with the circumcision debate.

²⁹ In Fanon’s work, ‘the colonial world is a Manichaean world’ (Fanon 2004: 6). There is the colonising force and the colonised; while the former is imposing, dominating, controlling, the latter is portrayed as impervious to any ethics or morals. Furthermore, not only is the colonised – or native – perceived as not possessing any values, they represent the negation of values (generally that of the coloniser). To this end, the ‘native’ is perceived as the enemy of values, or ‘absolute evil’ (Fanon 2004: 6). Conversely, it is because colonisers perceive themselves as holding values that they are able to justify the violence of colonisation and colonising practices. Specifically these are ‘Western’ or ‘White’ values that find their foundation in Greco-Roman philosophy and espouse key notions such as individualism and enlightenment. Fanon’s theory on violence as a tool and product of colonisation and its resistance is complex and beyond the scope of this dissertation. I include it as a way of contextualising how ‘Manichaeism’ is used in contemporary politico-social arguments.

This discussion paves the way for my claim in Chapter 2 that activists' and intactivists' views on circumcision are Manichaeistic. Not only is there a stark division between right and wrong for each stakeholder group when it comes to circumcision, but for intactivists specifically, there is an assumption that the body *prior to circumcision* is integral, whole, intact, hence circumcision *violates* and compromises bodily autonomy and integrity. To make this argument, this current chapter is concerned with the following questions: can we conceptualise violence in ways other than as an external body inflicting harm on another? What might this violence look like, and how does it play out?

My first step in this chapter is to consider some recent approaches to violence. First I ask, 'what is violence?' Subsequently I refer to the work of Hent de Vries who offers a useful way to conceptualise violence. I then draw on Wolfgang Sofsky as his observations on violence and ritual help with the question 'what is violence'. I continue with a discussion of Sigmund Freud's thesis in *Totem and Taboo* on primordial violence as a catalyst for and shaper of social structure and religion. I then consider some of the key themes in René Girard's work with a focus on sacrifice, ritual, and the concept of victim as anchor points in the overall discussion on violence. I go on to suggest that Freud and Girard both conceive of violence as an external intervention. I argue that both theorists rely on a notion of *primordial violence* to refer to an archaic form of violence that is intimately correlated with the formation of religious and social organisation. I call this primordial violence an *ontology of violence*. This concept exhibits the following characteristics: violence exhibits a logic of causality as either catalyst or outcome of an event. In the final section of the chapter, I use the work of Jacques Derrida to replace the concept of *ontology of violence* with a concept of the *violence of ontology*, which is characterised by a violence that is related to existence, the violence of being. It is not necessarily a causal happening, and in that it is related to existence, to being, it resists definition through binary oppositions.

What is Violence?

First let us pause and ask, what is violence? How is violence commonly understood, and how should we understand it? Let us consider the standard definition of violence offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). According to the *OED*, violence is a 'deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.; physically violent behaviour or treatment; (*Law*) the unlawful exercise of physical force, intimidation by the exhibition of such force' (OED Online, violence, n.: 2016). One thing to note here is that this standard definition of violence highlights the exertion of force upon subjects. This is a significant point as it implies that the force or source of violence is external,

perhaps even always external. There is a sense that violence involves an active, dominant, oppressing force that imposes upon, implicates, and modifies a weak, even passive counterpart. A violent act is perceived in negative terms, such that it is something that must be prevented and guarded against. To what extent are these themes reflected in prevailing social theories of violence?

A good starting point is the Dutch philosopher Hent de Vries, in particular his study *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (2001). De Vries is useful for a couple of reasons. First, de Vries' interest in the intersection between religion and violence resonates with my consideration of the Jewish circumcision ritual, a religious and violent ritual. Second, both de Vries and I draw on Derrida as a main theorist in our respective works. In brief, *Religion and Violence* asks in what ways and to what extent 'the notion of violence inevitably illuminates or shadows our ethico-political engagements and decisions, including, more broadly, our understandings of our identities, historical and in the present, collective and individual' (de Vries 2002: 1). The book sets out to explore the pervasiveness of the religious in everyday life in order to approach the question of violence. It is concerned with ethics, the social, and the political (de Vries 2002: xv, xvii). For de Vries, religion and violence are implicated in each other, as he writes: 'No violence without (some) religion; no religion without (some) violence' (de Vries 2002: 1). Violence is implicated in religion and vice versa. *Religion and Violence* explores the intimate correlation of violence and religion in themes such as the public sphere, hospitality and hostility, Christianity and Judaism, language, and the State and citizenship, among others. But how does de Vries conceptualise violence for the purpose of his discussion? Let's consider the matter in de Vries' own words:

Violence, in both the widest possible and the most elementary senses of the word, entails any cause, any justified or illegitimate force, that is exerted – physically or otherwise – by one thing (event or instance, group or person, and, perhaps, word and object) on another. Violence thus finds its prime model – its source, force, and counterforce – in key elements of the tradition called the religious (de Vries 2002: 1).

De Vries' statement clearly articulates the relation between violence and religion. It is also important to note his description of violence as any force, whether justified or not, as *exerted* physically or otherwise *by one thing on another*. There is a similarity between the notion of violence as something that is 'exerted' by one thing on another as put forward by de Vries, and the definition of violence as something 'forced against' that we found in the *OED*. Implicit in both is the idea that violence is a violation of one thing by an external other which necessitates a distinction between self and other, violator and violated. We see here echoes of Manichaean themes that I mentioned earlier. It is this understanding of violence as necessarily external that I want to explore further.

One of my concerns is that this sense of externality already evokes a social, indeed a moral response because it delineates two players: violator – violated, other – self. I want to ask if violence necessarily requires a sense of externality, such that it is imposed upon the self by an external other? Might there be another way to think of violence with regards to the ritual of circumcision?

Let us consider the work of the German Sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky next. Sofsky's book *Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War* (2003) is a piercing treatise on violence. Sofsky writes of survival and battle, terrorism and power; he studies the struggle between life and death and explores what drives humans to commit acts of profound terror such as mass murder, terrorist acts, and massacres. Not only is Sofsky curious as to how events of genocide – such as the Holocaust – came to be, but even more fundamentally, he is concerned with the question of why is violence such a substantive, even constant feature in human societies? But Sofsky acknowledges that answers to these questions, indeed any '[d]iscussion of violence is a battleground of ideologies and illusions' (2003: 16), which indicates the potential for multiple attitudes and approaches to the question of violence. For example: Is violence simply genetic, or cultural? Can we truly determine whether violence is the consequence of a singular or decisive cause, such as genetics and behavioural tendencies? Sofsky writes: 'Among the most comfortable hypotheses is the assumption that the legacy of evolution naturally predisposes us to violence' (2003: 16). This comfortable hypothesis is one that he seeks to challenge, insofar as he claims that: 'the dictatorship of the genes does not govern natural history, any more than civilization is the realm of liberty' (Sofsky 2003: 16). For Sofsky, to think of violence simply in genetic terms is to overlook its complexity. Genetic inheritance, even of intricate qualities such as intelligence or aggression, is not enough to tell us about the ways in which violent qualities can manifest (2003: 16). But if neither culture nor behaviour is to be accorded sole responsibility for violence, then why do people act violently?

It is worth noting here that in considering the root of our propensity for violence, Sofsky explores not only the violence and atrocities of wars and massacres, but also the violence found in seemingly less consequential forms such as football hooliganism (2003: 42-46) and police action. So his curiosity extends to the violence of the every day and the mundane. Sofsky makes a couple of important claims. First, that violence is a social phenomenon and second, there is no essential connection between motive and action. In Sofsky's words:

The nature and extent of many atrocities mislead us into assuming that the perpetrators must have been motivated by particularly violent impulses. This intuition goes against all logic. Human beings can behave in very different ways for one and the same reason, or they can do exactly the same thing on widely different grounds. There is no essential connection between motives and actions. Murders can be

committed out of love or hate, avarice or greed, jealousy or indifference. But not everyone who is tormented by jealousy, envies someone else's possessions, or has lost interest in the world inevitably becomes a murderer (Sofsky 2003: 17).

Sofsky's claim that there is 'no essential connection between motives and actions' is worth pausing on. Sofsky disrupts a particular logic of violence: the idea that there is necessarily an external cause for violent action. In other words, Sofsky complicates the idea that there are external and mitigating elements that serve as catalysts for violence. Now while often there might be external and mitigating causes of violence, Sofsky argues that we cannot make an essentialist or reductionist connection between motives and actions. So, while external factors may be associated with violent behaviour, they are not *in essence* correlated.

We seek easy answers for a complex entanglement of factors. For example, Sofsky observes the common assumption that in attempts to explain violence as an outcome of a mental derangement there are 'pathological forces at work in acts of violence' (Sofsky 2003: 19). Some, Sofsky argues, might see perpetrators as victimised by unhappy childhoods or as the product of watching 'brutal horror films, as if there had been no atrocities before the advent of television' (Sofsky 2003: 19). To Sofsky's mind, such pathologising arguments are reductive. There are still other explanations that seek to identify root causes such as social and economic disadvantage, inadequate parenting, political upheavals, stress, unemployment, psychotic urges, drug use and trauma to list but a few. But for Sofsky, the assumption that being part of disadvantaged and excluded social group is a prerequisite for violent behaviour is problematic because '[t]hese threadbare notions seek to eliminate the concept of guilt and free will' (Sofsky 2003: 19). In other words, if we only identify and blame social and/or psychological issues when it comes to violence, then ultimately no one can be held responsible for violent acts and their consequences (Sofsky 2003: 19).

Ultimately, Sofsky argues that pathological reasons such as social inequality, psychological inadequacy, poverty and isolation cannot adequately explain violence because they don't stand up to examination (Sofsky 2003: 20). For example, it is quite common that people who grow up in disadvantaged conditions, poverty, and abuse, with psychological conditions do not become violent individuals: 'Even in environments where violence has become a way of life, not everyone takes the chances on offer' (Sofsky 2003: 20). Recognising that we cannot just turn to context to explain violence, Sofsky asks: 'What, then, encourages people to make use of their freedom to commit violence, how do they cross the border, and what kind of world lies on the other side?' (Sofsky 2003: 21). Here the word 'freedom' is interesting as it implies 'choice'. In other words, if one's turn to violence is not genetically or socially predetermined, then one must choose violence. In Sofsky's

analysis, people have the freedom to choose either to act violently or to refrain from violence. But what conditions such choices one way or the other? What causes people to make use of their freedoms to choose to act in violence? To this, Sofsky admits that ‘although ultimately it is individuals who carry out atrocities, violence is usually a social process’, one that is temporal in nature (Sofsky 2003: 21). Violence ‘takes time, it alters situations and it changes human beings’ (Sofsky 2003: 21). Consequently, ‘[v]iolence is built into the basic forms of social life’ (2003: 70), from political and bureaucratic organisation to elemental divisions of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. To this end, political organisation and social norms engender violence, as well as restrain it. While violence may be associated with particular socio-economic conditions or pathological diagnoses, something more is at play. Following Sofsky, we might say that violence is a social condition, and further: ‘violence is the result of our specific humanity’ (Sofsky 2003: 8). It is worth teasing out this latter statement: while Sofsky conducts a focused study of wars, genocide and persecution, in saying that ‘violence is the result of our specific humanity’ he indicates that there is something about the very thing that makes us human that gears people towards violence. This ‘specific humanity’ has a closer association with violence than external factors, because it means that violence can happen to anyone: violence is accessible to every single person, regardless of their mitigating environment or situation, and often times even without reason. In other words, violence isn’t a perversion, but rather it is tied in with the very experience of being human.

Now, it is Sofsky’s analysis of ritual violence that is of particular interest to us, primarily because my research concerns the Jewish ritual of circumcision. Sofsky’s discussion of ritual proceeds as follows. In the first instance, rituals are repetitive, and performed at regular intervals or during certain occasions. This repetition means that a ritual is practiced in essentially the same way throughout a period of time and can span years, decades, even centuries. Hence Sofsky argues that rituals are ‘a kind of remembering in practice’ (Sofsky 2003: 213). We can take this to mean that because a ritual is repeatedly practiced in the same manner it in a sense holds the memory of all the years and times it was practiced. Rituals connect past and present, history and community. Repetition also serves to engender a notion of *sameness*, hence rituals serve to connect individual and collective (Sofsky 2003: 213). ‘Rituals facilitate transgression’, argues Sofsky, and further he intimates that they are violent in nature (2003: 24). There is something about the role of ritual that lends itself to violence. To this end, Sofsky observes that some of the oldest forms of violence such as hunting, war and sacrifices were often performed as rituals (2003: 24), and we see an example of this further on in Freud’s study of totemism and totem sacrifice. Sofsky offers other examples such as the sacrificial rites of the Aztecs or the Carthaginians, which ‘were no more than mass slaughter, pious acts of bloodshed’

(2003: 25). Violence often exhibits ritual elements, but this does not mean that the function of rites is to 'elevate violence by giving it meaning' (Sofsky 2003: 25). In other words, that rituals are violent does not necessarily mean that violence is in itself meaningful. Even though '[v]iolence lends the ritual an aura of gravity and sublimity' (Sofsky 2003: 25) violence can often be cruel and senseless.

In ritual, the use of violence reminds participants of life. Bloodshed combined with a joyous festive celebration reminds the community of the sanctity of being, as 'life is nourished by death' (Sofsky 2003: 25). But what can we make of Sofsky's point that violence should not be elevated? It is because so often violence is senseless, primal, murderous that we should exercise caution before endowing it with surplus meaning. Recall Sofsky's earlier words that there is 'no essential connection' between motives of violence and actions. Indeed, we could say that Sofsky's attention to violence is visceral. He writes: '[l]ike all the deeper experiences of life, the fascination of violence is ultimately physical in nature. The sight of it can become an obsession. It is not an avid desire for sensation that holds mankind spellbound but violence itself, the destruction of another body, the whimpering of a living being, the smell of blood' (Sofsky 2003: 9). There might not be symbolic meaning in murder necessarily: violence is often simply that – violent, ruthless, destructive.

Let us return to Sofsky's analysis of the function of ritual violence. Recall that, according to Sofsky, rituals are instances of transformation, 'of the shift from the secular to the sacred, from the status system to the community, from peace to war, from everyday life to the festival' (Sofsky 2003: 24). Ritual violence, then, 'is a way of creating community spirit' (Sofsky 2003: 25). This is done by means of festivities and joint celebration which produce a sense of community: 'Elation seizes upon the collective entity. Everyone shares it. In binding individuals close together, ritual frees them from the fears and misgivings that they must otherwise deal with alone' (Sofsky 2003: 25). Rituals offer a way for the community to come together in shared experience, complicity, and joint action: this creates a strong sense of identification and unanimity. This strong sense of community is significant for Sofsky as it explains why, consequently, people engage in violent actions and obey orders (Sofsky 2003: 26). This sense of community helps individuals transcend their fear of death and morality by engendering a lasting sense of community spirit (Sofsky 2003: 8). Furthermore, individuals work together as a group with the consequence that they are able to focus their energy through battle. In a sense then, ritual violence is 'a way of creating community spirit' (Sofsky 2003: 25). This is done through establishing bonds of loyalty, and making connections, alliances, and links. Thus we could think of violence as being a foundational social force, and in making this observation we must be mindful of Sofsky's caution that 'it is not the function of rites to elevate violence by giving it meaning'

(Sofsky 2003: 25). That is, violence is often senseless, it can happen to anyone by anyone, and it is accessible to any person without reason.

Importantly for Sofsky, rituals unleash violence. When Sofsky says that rituals unleash violence, there is the suggestion that the capacity – or potential - for violence is always already present in some form. If we push this observation a little further, we can suggest that from this perspective, rituals do not ‘generate’ or ‘create’ violence anew, but rather provide an avenue for violence to bubble to the surface. One might be inclined to object to the emphasis placed on the word ‘unleash’, but even so, there is every implication that violence is always a potential waiting to be released. This discussion of ritual violence is important as it frames ritual as a practice that reinforces community bonds. Rituals bond – and bind - individuals together because they generate a sense of community and cohesion. From this perspective, we begin to see emergent links between violence and society: violence – and the potential it - manifests in practically all aspects of life and takes various forms.

While it might seem that there is some tension between de Vries, for whom there is an intrinsic connection between violence and religion, and Sofsky, for whom there is no essential connection between motive and violence, I suggest that this is not altogether the case. Both theorists view violence as a pervasive force in social organisation and everyday life: the potential for violence in a sense is *everywhere*, and can happen at any time.

This brief consideration of various general approaches to violence has helped me identify the following common features: violence can be thought of as a social phenomenon, and ritual violence as a way of unleashing community spirit. Later on in this chapter, Freud and Girard supplement our discussion on ritual and violence.

Before we continue, let’s pause and assess where we are and revisit the foundations laid in this chapter. My reason for opening with de Vries was twofold. First, his work makes explicit an innate link between religion and violence, and second, he offers us a useful definition of violence as a force exerted – physically or otherwise – by one thing on another. Thus de Vries serves both as a point of entry and point of reference for our discussion on the religion and violence of Jewish ritual circumcision.

Our subsequent discussion of Sofsky ties in with de Vries: for both these thinkers violence is pervasive in everyday life. If de Vries offers us a helpful definition of violence, Sofsky gives us a framework through which we can explore what causes people to behave in violent ways. In this regard, Sofsky serves as a useful supplement to de Vries’ discussion, as de Vries offers us a common

way to conceptualise violence, and Sofsky violence in ritual. Sofsky makes two pertinent points. First that there is no essential connection between motive and violence, and second that ritual is a way of linking present and past (Sofsky 2003: 214). While neither theorist necessarily exhibits a Manichaean frame in their work, they do articulate a notion of violence that relies on *externality*. Recall de Vries' definition of violence as something *imposed upon*. For Sofsky too, violence takes place as an exertion of force by one person external to another.

Our next step is to turn to Sigmund Freud and René Girard respectively. I pose the following questions: Do Freud and Girard's works exhibit a Manichaean frame for violence? Is violence in Freud and Girard's work conceived as an *external intervention* by one thing upon another? And finally, what role does violence fulfil in community and social structure?

Freud

My discussion of Sigmund Freud concentrates on an argument developed in *Totem and Taboo* ([1913] 1990). Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, a method of treatment based on dialogue between patient and psychoanalyst. Freud was a prolific writer, some notable texts he produced are *The Interpretation of Dreams* ([1899] 1999), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920] 1989), and *Totem and Taboo* ([1913] 1990). In these texts and his practice, Freud developed novel approaches to understanding the human mind and personality. For our purposes, I wish to concentrate on Freud's argument in *Totem and Taboo* regarding ritual and sacrifice, both of which are linked to the origin of religion and the formation of a narrative of human society. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud engages in a speculative exercise that traces the origin of religion by combining psychoanalysis with contributions from anthropology, drawing in particular on J. G. Frazer's (1854-1941) *The Golden Bough* (1911-1915) and *Totemism and Exogamy* ([1910] 2010), Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and his theory of evolutionary biology in *The Origin of the Species* ([1859] 2009) and religious studies, in particular Robertson Smith's (1846-1894) *Religion of the Semites* ([1894] 2002).

I wish to explore whether Freud's work exhibits a Manichaean framework of oppositional binaries and if so, how does this framework manifest? Does Freud's work conceptualise violence as an *external intervention* by one thing upon another? What role does violence fulfil in community organisation and social structure?

Totem and Taboo

Following the work of Smith in *Religion of the Semites* ([1894] 2002) and J. G Frazer in *Totemism and Exogamy* ([1910] 2010), Freud locates the origin of all religious manifestations in totemism.

Totemism is a system of belief in which every person or group of people - such as a clan or tribe - believe they have a deep spiritual connection with another physical being, which is called 'totem'. In Freud's terms, a totem as a rule is 'an animal (whether edible and harmless or dangerous and feared) and more rarely a plant or a natural phenomenon (such as rain or water), which stand in peculiar relation to the whole clan' (Freud 1990: 2). The totem is the guardian spirit and helper, and the clan is under sacred obligation not to harm, destroy or kill their totem, 'and to avoid eating its flesh (or deriving benefit from it in other ways)' (Freud 1990: 2). Killing the totem is primal taboo prohibition.

Throughout *Totem and Taboo* ([1913] 1990), Freud examines totemic systems among so-called 'primitive communities' and 'savage communities'. In Freud's terms, primitive communities are the earliest human societies who lived in the simplest form of social organisation in contrast to 'savage communities', which are contemporary societies that lack any sense of modern culture and are similar to primitive communities in their simple social organisation. Both primitive and savage societies have equivalent systems of religious and social organisation, namely totemism, where as a general rule the totem is an animal. On the matter of the totem, Freud elaborates:

The totem is first of all the tribal ancestor of the clan, as well as its tutelary spirit and protector; it sends oracles and, though otherwise dangerous, the totem knows and spares its children. The members of a totem are therefore under a sacred obligation not to kill (destroy) their totem, to abstain from eating its meat or from any other enjoyment of it. Any violation of these prohibitions is automatically punished (Freud 1990: 1).

The totem animal is described as the father, patron, and guardian of the tribe. In return, members of the tribe are under sacred obligation to preserve the totem animal's life by not killing or harming it. But the obligation to not harm the totem has one concession: it must not be killed save under prescribed and exceptional circumstances such as for ceremonial purposes, thus in Sofsky's terms the potential for violence that has to that point been suppressed is now unleashed through the act of murder and sacrifice. We can think of the totem animal's sacrifice on these prescribed festival days as ritual practice insofar as it is a form of violence that serves to engender a sense of community, to borrow again from Sofsky (2003: 213). For Freud, a pivotal part of such ceremonies is the tribe's consumption of the totem's flesh, which Freud argues is an important feature of totemic religions

(Freud 1990: 499).³⁰ Surely we are prompted to ask: what is gained from eating the sacrifice of the totem? Freud explains (see Freud 1990: 498-500): it is because killing and eating the totem is forbidden on any other occasion that the ceremonies are extremely meaningful. Clan members are conscious that they are performing an act that is normally forbidden to the individual and justifiable only through participation of the whole clan. Thus we can think of these sacrificial ceremonies as celebration of community. While there is mourning involved, as the clan mourns the killing of its totem, it is combined with joyous celebration and festive excess; a festive feeling that comes from being able to transgress a prohibitive taboo – the killing and ingesting of the totem.

With respect to devouring the totem's flesh and blood Freud writes: 'It was essential that each one of the participants should have his share of the meal' (Freud 1990: 496). Consuming the flesh of the animal creates a bond between the sacrifice and clansmen, as nothing less than the life of the sacrificial animal resides in its flesh and blood, which is shared among all the participants in the sacrificial meal (Freud 1990: 498). Freud subsequently argues that at the root of all blood covenants 'by which men made compacts with each other even at a late period of history' (Freud 1990: 498) is this notion of the bond distributed through flesh.

For Freud, one of the most primal forms of clan engagement is ritual and sacrifice. In totemic clans primordial violence enabled community expression and bond. If we think of totemic societies as precursors to organised religion – which as I show further on that Freud indeed does – we can relate de Vries' position that there is no violence without (some) religion. Primordial violence takes the form of ritual and sacrifice: indeed, a primary feature of organised religion is the practice of rituals that serves to engender a strong sense of community and sameness. We see this function of ritual in Sofsky too, who argues that rituals serve to connect individual and collective, and that rituals are violent in nature. The violence of ritual in its most primal form is murder and sacrifice; these are violent acts that reinforce community bonds.

Unity through Flesh

Not only are festivities of sacrifice celebrations and sites of violence that reinforce community bonds, but also in devouring the flesh of the totem, the clan acquires sanctity: 'they reinforce their identification with it and with one another', says Freud (1990: 500). The totemic feast thus served to bring the clan together and unite each person with the other, as well as with the sacred totem. Thus

³⁰ Freud gives the example of the *intichiuma* ceremonies of Central Australian Indigenous clans where, during the ceremony where they perform magic for the proliferation of their totem, each clan is obliged to eat a small portion of its totem (Freud 1990: 499).

the clan could not only share in the guilt of killing the totem, but also in the joy that came from celebrations. Consequently, such celebrations served to reinforce the totem as patron of the tribe.

It must be noted here that with regards to the relation between the totem, the group, and the practice of ritual sacrifice Freud takes up a strand of argument developed by Smith. Similar to Freud, for Smith totemism is the earliest form of religion.³¹ Smith writes that the act of sacrifice constitutes ‘an act of communion, in which the god and his worshippers unite by partaking together of the flesh and blood of the sacred victim’ (Smith 2002: 226-227). For Smith, to understand sacrifice as communion (here, the sacrificial victims are animals) is to recognise a relationship or a bond between the god and clan. Freud adopts Smith’s hypothesis that sacramental and communal killing and eating of the totem animal for ceremonial occasions is an important feature of totemic religions (Freud 1990: 499). If, for Smith, emphasis on a personal relationship with god is at the root of religion, for Freud relationship with the patriarchal father-god hinges on guilt and longing. Freud writes:

Psycho-analysis has revealed that the totem animal is in reality a substitute for the father; and this tallies with the contradictory fact that, though the killing of the animal is as a rule forbidden, yet its killing is a special occasion – with the fact that it is killed and mourned (Freud 1990: 500).

Freud’s association of the totem animal with the father figure in psychoanalysis comes to reflect the complex relations between community and its patron totem. The father is an important figure in psychoanalysis where he is a key element of the ‘Oedipus complex’, a concept introduced by Freud in his work *Interpretation of Dreams* ([1899] 2015: 199-202, 218). In psychoanalytic theory the Oedipus complex, which takes its name from the mythological Greek king Oedipus, is a desire for an intimate involvement with the parent of the opposite sex that produces a concomitant sense of rivalry with the parent of the same sex. Freud’s argument is as follows: in the pre-Oedipal phase, which is the phase of psychosexual development prior to the development of the Oedipus complex, boys form a loving and friendly identification with the father, who is an idealised figure. This loving identification is disrupted during the Oedipal phase when boys direct their first sexual impulses towards their mother. The father, once idealised and adored, is now in competition for the mother’s affection. Consequently young boys develop intensified wishes to take the father’s place with the mother, and develop competitive and hostile feelings toward the father, which are combined with

³¹ In *Religion of the Semites* Smith explores the nature of Semitic religion (Judaism, Islam, Christianity). Smith turns to Arabia as the earliest example of Semitic religion: ‘In many respects the religion of heathen Arabia, though we have little information concerning it that is not of post-Christian date, displays an extremely primitive type’ (Smith 2002: 14). Here the *primitive type* of religion is a consequence of the ‘primitive’ character of nomadic life (Smith 2002: 14). In quick comparison, Durkheim in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995) turns to Australian Aboriginal groups as the earliest and most clear example of the emergence of religion.

deep feelings of guilt as nevertheless, the father is still the father, and if the child desires to take the place of the father, then that must mean that the father needs to be eliminated. Thus the child's first violence, wishes and hatred are directed towards his father, resulting in immense guilt.

Returning to our example of the totem and clan, Freud's correlation between totem and father signifies the complex web of emotions that surfaces during the Oedipus phase. The totem is overseer, guardian spirit and helper of the clan. Thus devouring the flesh of the totem can come to represent a hidden desire to take the totem's place. I examine this claim in a moment.

I now want us to consider the final essay of *Totem and Taboo* - 'The Return of Totemism in Childhood', where Freud argues that the origins of totemism lie in a singular event, which we turn to presently. In this final essay Freud draws on Darwin's claim that the alpha-male grouping was one of the early arrangements of human societies.³² In Freud's words:

There is, of course, no place for the beginnings of totemism in Darwin's primal horde. All that we find there is a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up. This earliest state of society has never been an object of observation. The most primitive kind of organization that we actually come across – and one that is in force to this day in certain tribes – consists of bands of males; these bands are composed of members with equal rights and are subject to the restrictions of the totemic system, including inheritance through the mother (Freud 1990: 500).

In the passage above, Freud describes a primal horde ruled by a dominating father who controls the members of his group, keeps all the females to himself, and drives his sons away so as not to be challenged by them or be required to share the women he claims for himself. Freud argues that this horde composition is the most primitive, earliest state of society and as such, it could not be 'an object of observation' (Freud 1990: 500). Freud is curious: as the primal horde organisation differs from the primitive tribal arrangements we do know of (which are composed of members with equal rights and maternal lineage), how did one form of organisation emerge from the other? In other words, how did the transition from a patriarchal tribal horde to a tribe with a totem system take place? Freud finds a clue to this problem in the custom of the totem meal: 'If we call the celebration of the totem meal to our help, we shall be able to find an answer' (Freud 1990: 500). Thus we can identify that the sacrificial meal is a moment the primal horde and totem clans share.

Freud suggests that the shift in tribal organisation emerges from Darwin's primal horde, which also signifies the beginning of organised religion. Freud speculated that this shift occurred when the

³² Darwin speculated that the alpha-male group was one of the early arrangements of human society - a group of females and males dominated by an alpha-male who controlled the group, including the male kin.

primal horde sons overtook their father. One of the characteristics of the primal horde grouping is the fight for dominance. The father of the primal horde intended to retain his position as the dominant figure and so expelled his sons from the patriarchal group. However, and this is the point on which the story pivots, the group of brothers returns with the intent of killing their father - whom they feared as well as respected - and take his place. Freud writes:

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually (Freud 1990: 500).

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

Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primordial father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things - of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion (Freud 1990: 500-501).

The father, once 'the god of the clan' (Freud 1990: 506), is now dead, and the sons carry the burden of his death. Consumed by guilt over the death of their father, the brothers ingest his flesh in a totemic meal which is a powerful symbolic meal where the brothers 'acquire some portion of his strength' through consuming the flesh of the father (Freud 1990: 500). The brothers not only ingest the father's flesh, but they also gain some of his attributes: the sons consequently reclaim the women of the horde and take their father's place. Thus by devouring the father, the brothers accomplish their identification with him.³³ Following these events, the murdered father was symbolised in the totem animal. The sacrifice of the totem animal is important as through it, the sons could try to relieve their sense of guilt over the murder of their father. In other words, through sacrifice, they try

³³ We can note resonance between the primordial brothers' urges to take the place of the father and claim his women and the Oedipus complex.

and bring about reconciliation with him – a moral response which surfaces from feelings of guilt at the moment the sons realise the consequences of their actions.

For Freud, the emergence of morality from violence helps him draw a link to Christianity which is a religion that is centred on a figure that is both God and ‘son’. This observation allows Freud to reflect up on the simultaneous origin of religion and morality: here we have a band of brothers who join together to kill their dominating godlike father; and in so doing, they become remorseful and long for reconciliation with their father. Burdened by guilt, the brothers turn to consume the flesh of the father, now victim and sacrifice. The brothers literally incorporate the father’s flesh into theirs. But with the sacrifice comes guilt and longing. Here we can pin down the emergence of morality and moral restrictions as reactions to an action that – it became clear to the perpetrators of that deed after the fact – was a crime. Here we see evidence of the Manichaeian framework, where morality is on the opposite side to violence, as a response *to* violence. Together with the deep sense of guilt that took over the brothers came morality: it was only once the brothers sensed guilt that they realised what they had done, and the terrible nature of their act, patricide, became clear. The brothers ‘regretted this deed and decided that it should not be repeated’ (Freud 1990: 512). As the murder of the father brought on a moral reaction, the brothers decide never to repeat this violence and instead, come to sacrifice an animal each year in commemoration of this event. The repetition of this violent ritual resonates with Sofsky’s claim that rituals are collective acts of remembering, and thus, link present to past.

The psychological themes of jealousy, hatred, longing, and guilt present in the Oedipus complex surface in the example of the primal horde and totem clans, hence these primal urges were not only instigators of social change and religion, but continue to be present in every day life.

Freud argues that the sacrifice of the father by his sons is ‘the first great act of sacrifice’ (Freud 1990: 507), an act that consequently paved the way for social organisation, moral restriction, and religion, namely Christianity. Thus the sacrifice of the father was the catalyst for a significant social and moral shift. The moral shift is due to the guilt and longing felt by the brothers: they hated their father who was a dominating, controlling figure, yet loved him and admired him deeply. What’s more, the father – in his dominance of the primal horde – was an obstacle for the brothers’ cravings and sexual desires. The brothers sought to identify themselves with the father but as long as he was alive there was no room for them. Indeed, they were sent away, a journey from which they would only return to kill the controlling patriarch. Once this event took place the feelings of hatred and resentment subsided, leaving room for underlying emotions of love and admiration to surface: ‘the affection

which had all this time been pushed under was bound to make itself felt' (Freud 1990: 501). And so, 'a sense of guilt made its appearance, which in this instance coincided with the remorse felt by the whole group' (Freud 1990: 501). The elimination of the father is at once bound with a longing for him, and so, in lieu of his father, the son assumes the role of omnipotent ruler. 'The psycho-analysis of individual human beings', Freud says, teaches us that 'the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father' and more, 'that at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father' (Freud 1990: 504). After the primal patricide and the killing and devouring of the father came longing. A longing *for* the father resulted in the son taking the place of the father, assuming his role. The brothers revived the 'old father ideal' (Freud 1990: 504) through making 'those individuals who had distinguished themselves above the rest' into gods (Freud 1990: 504). This 'longing for the father' (Freud 1990: 505) constitutes the root of every form of religion.

There are evident links between the primal horde and totemic clans, as after the murder of the totem animal, its flesh and blood would be ingested – much like the father was consumed by his sons. 'It was essential', Freud writes of totem sacrifice, 'that each one of the participants should have his share of the meal' (Freud 1990: 496). Consuming the flesh of the animal creates a bond between the sacrifice and the clansmen, as nothing less than the life of the sacrificial animal resides in its flesh and blood, which is shared among all the participants in the sacrificial meal (Freud 1990: 498). Freud subsequently argues that at the root of all blood covenants 'by which men made compacts with each other even at a late period of history' (Freud 1990: 498) is this notion of the bond distributed through flesh and blood.

In Freud's analysis, we can trace the beginning of religion to this primordial sacrifice of the father by his sons. In this event of violence and sacrifice that underpins organised religion, we see evidence of de Vries' claim that there is 'no violence without (some) religion; no religion without (some) violence'. Violence and religion are inextricable. In addition, we can recall the standard definition of violence as offered by the *OED* as the exertion of force upon subjects, which means the force or source of violence is external, and involves an active, dominant force that imposes violence upon another. This exemplifies the violent struggle between father and sons. All this is to say that the primordial act of violence and murder was already linked with religion and ritual, and hinges on themes of externality and opposition that characterise the dualism of the Manichaean frame: father – sons, human – animal, god – human, tribe – individual, and violence – morality.

We can immediately recognise the foundational place that violence occupies in Freud's narrative; patricide and cannibalism were catalysts for both social change and for the development of moral

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

Thus far I have shown the persistence of Manichaean qualities of binaries and externality in Freud's narrative of violence, and the intricate correlation between violence and religion. In what follows, I continue in my attempt to understand fundamental approaches to violence and turn to René Girard whose theory of violence is peripherally aligned with Freud's. As we shall see below, Freud's concept of 'collective murder' is close to the themes in Girard's work (Girard 2013: 221). Both theorists are concerned with formulating a theory of violence that is fundamentally linked to the formation of the social. We must note that while in contrast with Freud's theory of primordial violence, which was entirely speculative, for Girard this moment of violence is real, that is: it is located in a place and time in history. For Girard, too, as we shall see below, a moment of violence is a foundational event in the evolution of society. Girard argues that the origin of violence takes place in a real event that should be viewed as 'absolute beginning' (Girard 2013: 353). I note the 'realness' of the event in contrast to Freud's speculation about the primordial moment of violence. In Girard's theory, a consequence of this 'absolute beginning' or the moment of origin for generative violence is the simultaneous emergence of a surrogate victim. It is worth noting here that Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (2013) dedicates a whole chapter to Freud's *Totem and Taboo*.³⁴ It opens by stating that '[c]ontemporary criticism is almost unanimous in finding unacceptable the theories set forth in *Totem and Taboo*' (2013: 219). Rather than condemning *Totem and Taboo* 'to oblivion' Girard has a different attitude to Freud's work (Girard 2013: 221). He notes that Freud's concept of collective murder (that is, the murder of the father by the brothers - the violence of the primal horde) is close to themes of his own work (Girard 2013: 221).

³⁴ Girard argues that for many Freudians there has been an 'antireferential prejudice' when it comes to criticising Freud and thinking about problems in his work, especially *Totem and Taboo*, which is considered Freud's most problematic work: 'everyone seems intent on covering *Totem and Taboo* with obloquy and condemning it to oblivion' remarks Girard (2013: 221). This is due to the themes of the text: Freud discusses incest, murder, and cannibalism, among other themes. However, Girard does not want to pass over *Totem and Taboo* in silence. Girard's intervention into the theme of 'collective murder' is his notion of the 'surrogate victim', a mechanism that, according to Girard, 'eluded Freud', and thus constitutes what he failed to recognise the *modus operandi* of violence and collective murder.

It should also be noted that both Girard and Freud were inspired by Charles Darwin's work in *The Origin of the Species* ([1859] 2009). Freud was concerned with Darwin's thesis of the primal horde and set out to develop it as the preliminary form of tribal organisation, the site of primordial violence that was the catalyst for societal change. Conversely, Girard set out to argue for a theory of universal violence that is in full accord with evolutionary biology (Girard 2013: 353-355). For Girard, just as the theory of evolution and natural selection is the rational principle through which the immense diversity of forms of life is explained, the process of victimisation is the rational principle that explains the origin of the infinite diversity of cultural forms. Importantly, Girard takes the links he makes between the theory of evolution and a theory of violence a step further and argues that violence is instrumental in human evolution.³⁵

Does Girard's works exhibit a Manichaean frame for violence? Is violence in Girard's work conceived as an *external intervention* by one thing upon another? And finally, what role does violence fulfil in community and social structure?

Girard

René Girard (1923 – 2015), named as one of the most important cultural theorists of the twentieth century (Fleming 2004), was a French born historian, anthropologist, and philosopher of social science whose work draws on philosophy and literature, and belongs to the tradition of anthropological philosophy. For the purpose of this dissertation, I concentrate on *Violence and the Sacred* ([1988] 2013), in which Girard studies patterns of violence in human societies, tribal communities and mythologies and identifies an intimate link between sacrifice, violence and religion. In Girard's terms, violence is endemic to human societies so much so that 'if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into "proper channels"' (Girard 2013: 10). Thus the role of sacrifice is to curtail violence and prevent it from going out of control. To this end, Girard argues that 'violence and the sacred are inseparable' (2013: 20). Furthermore, 'violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred' (2013: 34). To understand Girard's statement and his relevance to my project, we must first address his conception of violence which is intimately linked to desire.

³⁵ Andrew McKenna argues that Girard's project holds out for a unified theory in the human sciences (McKenna 1992: 11).

Desire and Violence

For Girard, the violence at the core of social organisation is not a metaphorical violence (such as Freud's speculations on the primal horde), but is rooted in a real event in time. Girard argues that 'in one way or another violence is always mingled with desire' (Girard 2013: 163). Desire is thus a driving force. Girard puts forward the theory of mimetic desire as a tool through which we can explore human social evolution.³⁶ For Girard, human desire is by and large mimetic, meaning that a person is likely to imitate another's desire. This is indeed a primal urge. In Girard's words:

Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being (emphasis in original, Girard 2013: 164).

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

³⁶ 'Mimetic' comes from the Greek word *mimesis*, meaning 'to imitate'. Girard usually distinguishes 'imitation' from 'mimesis'. While the concept 'imitation' is usually understood as the positive aspect of reproducing someone else's behavior, 'mimesis' usually implies the negative aspect of rivalry.

converge on the same object, they are destined to clash: ‘mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict’ (Girard 2013: 164). What happens when desire is shared? Simply put, sharing the same desires leads to rivalry and conflict. When desire is shared, rivalry and jealousy inevitably arise, and lead to the threat of violence.

Girard argues that mimetic desire leads to rivalries that have the capacity to threaten the existence of communities. Put simply, a consequence of people imitating each other’s desires is that they end up desiring the same things, and so rivalry comes into play: if people desire the same things, they will try and reach for the same objects, thus they become rivals in their pursuit of the object of desire. Mimetic desire is a source of continual conflict (Girard 2013: 191). By copying another person’s desire, or turning ‘one man’s desire into a replica of another man’s desire’ (2012: 191), rivalry ensues. Thus the mimetic nature of desire historically sets members of society in conflict with one another. Each rival seeks to reassert his or her primacy in face of the other. The consequence of this is that communities may be engulfed with rivalry, envy and violence with no foreseeable recourse: a mechanism had to be put in place in order to curtail escalating violence. Here, Girard introduces the scapegoat mechanism. In order to prevent a violent crisis, an arbitrary scapegoat is blamed for the violence. It is only through collective condemnation and sacrifice of this (often innocent) scapegoat that the social crisis could be evaded. Curiously, the scapegoat is the only one who comprehends the lie at the heart of the accusation, the only one who knows the ‘truth’ of the community, thus making the scapegoat into a threatening figure.³⁷ What effectively alleviates the threat of violence is the sacrifice of the scapegoat because it serves to bring the community together. This event leads to ritual imitations, placing what Girard calls the ‘surrogate victim’ in place of the original victim.

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

³⁷ The scapegoat is the only one who knows the ‘truth’ as they are the only ones who know they’re truly innocent.

Sacrifice and Victim

Girard argues that every culture has an archetypal form of a surrogate victim, and even brings examples from a number of different tribal communities as well as various myths and folklore.³⁸ The purpose of the 'surrogate victim' is to be sacrificed in place of the entire community. Ritual and sacrifice thus become a regulatory mechanism that dispels social violence and prevents it from spiralling. Moreover, it prevents further conflict from erupting, and finally, it helps to unite a society (Girard 2013: 15). This latter aspect is a function of ritual that resonates with Sofsky's argument that rituals engender community and sameness. By way of example, Girard draws on an ancient religious ritual described in the Hebrew Bible in Leviticus 16 whereby communal sins were projected upon or transferred to a male goat that was eventually abandoned in the desert or sacrificed to the gods. There, the goat was sacrificed in place of communal sins, as a measure of maintaining social security.

In order to regulate the violence that threatens their whole community, communities project this communal violence onto a single individual. Once the process of the surrogate victim as the 'redeemer' of the community is established, it becomes mythologised and internalised as part of the society's cultural memory and history. The figure that was sacrificed assumes the role of a deity who saves the community from destruction.³⁹ Since a pattern started with the cessation of violence by the original human sacrifice, the continuation of that pattern is understandable. As cultures and societies progressed, symbols such as animal sacrifices and sacred rituals came to be used in place of human sacrifices. Rituals served to unite the society in recollection of the original victim which through its sacrifice diverted violence from the community. Girard's discussion of ritual is echoed in Sofsky's argument that ritual is a form of remembering in practice (Sofsky 2003: 213). And so, the surrogate victim serves as a substitute for all members of the community, protecting them from ensuing violence, by sacrifice. Girard continues:

³⁸ Such as the stories of Oedipus and Dionysus, wherein the latter is used as a point of reference for sacrificial rites among the Swazi (Girard 2013: 286)

³⁹ Girard quotes from Gatapatha-Brahmana from a text by orientalist Sylvain Levi. To illustrate and to contextualise Girard's argument I have reproduced this segment from Girard's text, verbatim: 'In the beginning the gods sacrificed a man; when he was killed, his ritualistic virtues deserted him. They entered a horse; the gods sacrificed the horse; when it was killed, the ritualistic virtues deserted it. They entered a sheep; the gods sacrificed the sheep; when it was killed, the ritualistic virtues deserted it. They entered a goat; the gods sacrificed the goat; when it was killed, the ritualistic virtues deserted it and entered the earth. The gods dug for them, and found them in the form of rice and barley. And that is why today we still dig the earth to produce rice and barley' (Sylvain Levi *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brahmanas* quoted in Girard 2013: 309). One of the curious conclusions we can draw from this story is that sacrifice is digested, and that we partake of it every time rice and barley are consumed: 'And that is why today we still dig the earth to produce rice and barley'. This means there is a driving force motivating us to return to and re-partake in the moment of sacrifice; a notion that resonates with Sofsky's claim that rituals are forms of repetition.

The function of sacrifice ... not only allows for but requires a surrogate victim – in other words, violent unanimity. In ritual sacrifice the victim, when actually put to death, diverts violence from its forbidden objectives within the community (Girard 2013: 114).

I suggest that in this context ‘violent unanimity’ means an act of violence accepted and adhered to by the community, with the intention of curbing violent outbreaks and uniting the community. But ritual and violence aren’t only elements of primordial groups; in fact, Girard claims that the original act of violence is the ‘matrix of all ritual and mythological significations’ from which organised religion emerged (Girard 2013: 125). Religion, violence, ritual and sacrifice are intrinsically linked, as Girard argues: ‘All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim, and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from ritual’ (Girard 2013: 347). With respect to this dissertation’s primary concern – the violence of Jewish ritual circumcision – I propose that Girard helps conceptualise ritual and violence as generative forces in religious and social evolution; it is pertinent to remember this in light of intactivist and activist arguments on circumcision which – as we see further on – effectively sever the practice from its ritual roots, a gesture that can also be thought of as a kind of violence.

With respect to religion, elsewhere Girard argues that ‘ritual and prohibition in their most elementary form precede representation. They slowly become representable and finally they are represented’⁴⁰ (Girard in an interview with Müller 1996). Inevitably, claims Girard, religion strives to subdue violence. In an extension of the religious regulation of violence, religious authorities instil nonviolence as an active force in daily life and as a force that mediates daily life and spiritual life through the application of violence (Girard 2013: 22). Here Girard raises the matter of *pietas* as an example of nonviolent acts through which rites are performed.⁴¹ Sacrifice is both sinful and saintly, Girard argues; but it is as well both a legitimate and illegal exercise of violence (Girard 2013: 22). In essence, to prevent violence from running wild, religion uses rites as performative measures that prevent uncontrolled violence.

Here it might be useful to identify a couple of points of contact between Freud and Girard. Both talk about a definitive moment of violence that is the catalyst for a major societal change. For both Freud and Girard, sacrifice is instrumental in that it is symbolic but also productive: it is a moral imperative because it serves to correct, alter, or fix the violation caused by social crisis. The sacrifice – both for

⁴⁰ Through *mimesis* and acquisition, the original object of desire becomes a representation of the larger desire.

⁴¹ *Pietas* means dutifulness, and can be understood as a sense of respect, reverence, or duty (OED *pietas*, n. 2016). Thus *pietas* can refer to an inherent notion of duty and obligation.

Freud and Girard - is the redeemer of crime. For Girard, this moment of violence echoes in every myth and tribal narrative (both theorists invoke the story of Oedipus to illustrate their point); and for Freud, the 'original sin' led to the formation of Christian doctrine (i.e., the son becomes the god in place of the father, a son-god displaced the primitive father-god). Still today, in Christianity, there are remnants of that first totemic ritual that reflect the eating the flesh of the father who in his death redeemed the sin of his sons, manifest in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

To briefly sum up: Both Freud and Girard explore the origin point of violence. Freud and Girard offer us a framework to think of 'primordial violence'. By 'primordial violence', I mean a commitment to an original or first moment of violence. For both thinkers, a primordial violence is linked to the formation of society. For both, an expression of this moment of primordial violence is found in every culture, society, and mythical narrative. For them, effectively, the primordial moment produces society. For Girard, the moment of primordial violence establishes or creates a community. For Freud, this primordial violence produces society. Both Freud and Girard provide us with an *ontology of violence*, a concept that exhibits a characteristic of violence that is a 'logic of causality'. In other words, violence is either catalyst or outcome of an event. But must violence always be reduced to a primary moment? De Vries, Sofsky, Freud and Girard all allow us to conceptualise violence as being intrinsically linked with ritual and religion. For each, violence also relies on a sense of *externality*. Let us now consider whether we can conceptualise of violence that is somehow related to existence, the violence of being. This would be a violence that is not necessarily a causal happening because it does not hinge on a primary moment. Such a conception of violence would reflect its livedness. To make my argument I turn to the works of the French theorist Jacques Derrida.

Derrida's Response

My examination of Freud and Girard has demonstrated their commitment to an ontology of violence that stresses an oppositional logic between self and other that is embedded in a logic of externality. Both exhibit Manichaean qualities insofar as they identify a source of violence (a perpetrator) and an effect of violence (a victim). My worry is that this view inhibits us from understanding the *livedness* of violence, specifically, the lived relation of circumcision. In this section, I consider the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in order to seek an alternative to the ontology of violence given to us by Freud and Girard. My goal is to replace the idea of *ontology of violence* with a conception of the *violence of ontology*.

To approach my discussion of Derrida I refer to two sources: *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More To Follow)* (2004) and *The Gift of Death* (2007). The first allows me to examine Derrida's treatment of the story of Adam naming all the animals that roam the earth in Genesis. The second allows me to examine Derrida's treatment of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. These texts help me to establish a way of looking at violence as a generative force that can contribute to identity and the production of meaning. Through my discussion of Derrida's treatment of the tale of Adam I wish to highlight another approach to primordial violence, an act that arguably re-lives itself in the human - animal relationship to this day. In other words, Derrida offers an example of a primordial violent act that is not singular, but rather continues to be present and reproduced in every human - animal relationship and in fact produces the meaning we make of this relationship. Such a *generative* expression of violence can also be seen in the ritual of circumcision, and Derrida gives me the tools to make that argument. Secondly, I chose to focus on Derrida's treatment of the Sacrifice of Isaac as an occasion to challenge a Manichaean framework of violence, whereby 'violence' is starkly opposed to values such as 'good' or 'moral'. My challenge is based on the notion that intactivist and activist arguments on circumcision hinge on this division: circumcision is violent and thus immoral, or circumcision is a medical necessity and thus moral respectively. With the sacrifice of Isaac, we have an example of a violent event that is at once moral (insofar as God demanded it) and immoral (murder).

Derrida's Ontology

Derrida's work is helpful to address the following questions: What is a possible alternative to the Manichaean framework of violence? Does violence always rely on a notion of externality?

As I previously explained, I focus on the themes of sacrifice and the violence of naming in Derrida's work. I want to begin with the story of Genesis as discussed in Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More To Follow)* (2004), hereafter 'The Animal', and then move onto *The Gift Of Death* (2007), where we consider Derrida's treatment of the sacrifice of Isaac.

In 'The Animal', Derrida argues that an opposition between human and animal organises modern metaphysics. Writing about the experience of being 'caught' naked in front of his cat, Derrida says: 'It is as if I were ashamed, therefore, naked in front of this cat, but also ashamed for being ashamed' (Derrida 2004: 372). What is it about this encounter that made him suddenly feel self-conscious and aware of his nakedness, his being exposed? Where did this shame come from, Derrida wonders?

Derrida begins to deconstruct one facet of the animal - human opposition by beginning in the beginning; namely, with Genesis. This is a story of the creation of the world, animals, and

humankind. There are two accounts of creation in Genesis, Derrida reminds us, and the narratives differ. The first one has God create man and woman at the same time; they are equal to each other. In the second narrative however, God creates Adam (the man who in this telling has a name), and after Adam fails to find a partner for himself from all the creatures on the earth, God creates woman, or Isha from Adam's own body.⁴² There is thus a trace of man, or Ish in Isha in this narrative, whereas in the first they were individual creations.⁴³ What Derrida finds curious is that Adam was charged with naming all living animals. It is worth considering Derrida's words in full, as he recounts the differences between the narratives of creation. In the first narrative, Derrida points out, God commands 'man-woman' to 'command the animals, but not yet to name them'⁴⁴ (Derrida 2004: 385). Regarding the second narrative, Derrida writes:

On the one hand, the naming of the animals is performed *at one and the same time*, before the creation of Isha,⁴⁵ the female part of man, *and*, as a result, before they perceive themselves to be naked; and they are at first naked without shame ("The two of them are naked, the husbandman and his wife; they don't blanch on account of it.") After a certain serpent - one we shall return to - comes by, they will perceive themselves to be naked, and not without shame (emphasis in original, Derrida 2004: 385).

What is implied here is significant: the naming of the animals was performed by Ish (man) alone, before the creation of Isha (woman), and before either of them knew shame. Ish had named all the animals, realising in the end that there was no partner for him; his singularity suddenly became a lived, embodied experience. It was at this point that Ish turned to God, asking for a partner. In a

⁴² In Genesis, the words defining 'man' and 'woman' are varied. I want to take a closer look at this for the sake of clarity. In the first narrative of Genesis, we see the following sentence: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female created he them' (Genesis 1: 27). However, in the Hebrew version, the word for 'man' translates to 'Adam'. So the sentence would read: And God created Adam in His own image [...] male and female created He them'. Adam remains the only character, even as we turn to the second narrative, in Genesis 2. There, Adam is placed by God in the garden of Eden, and again this is lost in the English translation: 'The Lord God took the man [or, in the Hebrew version, Adam] and put him into the garden of Eden to till it and care for it' (Genesis 2: 15). Adam remains Adam until the moment woman – or Isha – was created from his rib: 'and the man said: 'Now this, at last - bone from my bones, flesh of my flesh! - this shall be called Woman [Isha], for from man Man [Ish] was this taken' (Genesis 2: 23). It is worth noting here that the Hebrew spelling of Ish [אִישׁ] and Isha [אִשָּׁה] are very similar. The primary difference is the addition of the letter ה to אִישׁ [man] making the word אִשָּׁה [woman]. The letter ה is of particular significance in Judaism, as it is commonly used in place of one of the more common and holy name of God - the *Tetragrammaton*.

⁴³ These two stories of creation are fascinating with much written about them. Jewish mysticism proposes that the first woman was Lilith, who was banned from Paradise because Adam found her too dominant. In particular, Lilith preferred to be on top during sex; Adam struggled with this, and so God banished her. Scorned Lilith subsequently went on to become mother of demons and is one of the more fascinating characters in Jewish mythology.

⁴⁴ Here, the term 'man-woman' denotes the creation of man and woman as equals. They were created together, not one after the other.

⁴⁵ Because Isha is a Hebrew word, it can be translated to English as Isha or Ishah as the final 'h' is silent. For the most part, the common translation is Isha, and this is the one I use throughout this chapter. That said, when quoting directly from Derrida's text I maintain fidelity to his spelling of the word. The variation on spelling does not influence the meaning.

sense, the act of naming was the catalyst for self-awareness, prompted by a profound sense of loneliness, an attempt to locate one's place in the world. Derrida continues:

On the other hand, and this is especially important, the public announcing of names remains *at one and the same time* free and *overseen*, under surveillance, under the gaze of Jehovah who does not for all that intervene. He lets Adam, he lets man, man alone, Ish without Ishah, the woman, freely call out the names. He lets him go about naming alone. But he is waiting in the wings, watching over this man alone with a mixture of curiosity and authority. God observes: Adam is observed, within sight, he names under observation (emphasis in original, Derrida 2004: 385).

Derrida's brief but considered pause on 'naming' is meaningful, as it brings the human - animal opposition to the foreground. In a sense, Derrida's examination of 'naming' is a consideration of a particular philosophical violence against animals. If we take a generous approach to the matter of 'the name' we might argue that names have something to do with identity, that they are markers of identification. Implied in Adam's primordial naming of all earthly animals is at once a *silencing* (Adam speaks for them, has given them a name) and *meaning-making* (they now have a name, a unique identifier others can know them by). This silencing is a violent act, a primordial sin against animals that are now denied a voice. Indeed, their identities are now always already in relation to Adam.

I paused on this discussion because it establishes the violence of the moment when an animal-otherness was established and reinforced. It is, in other words, a violence of ontology, rather than an ontology of violence, because the violence Derrida writes of has to do with *the becoming of being* (both animal being, and human being).

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

Derrida's preoccupation with the violence of naming recurs throughout his work. Notably, *On the Name* (1995) is a collection of three essays dedicated to the various ethical, political and linguistic issues of 'naming'. Derrida's interest in names, in particular the 'proper name' (and to this extent - the signature) is derived from names being a mark of propriety and ownership. When an author publishes a book, for example, that book is always seen as a product of the author - their name inscribed on the cover is a mark of propriety. The author writing gives her or his name to their

concept.⁴⁶ For Derrida, at stake are the terms of ‘responsibility’ and the ‘indefinite paradox of narcissism’: ‘Suppose that X, something or someone (a trace, a work, an institution, a child), bears your name, that is to say, your title’ (Derrida 1995: 12). As you have given your name to X, you think that all that returns to X ‘in a direct or indirect way’ returns to you. But such thinking is a common illusion, a product of narcissism, argues Derrida, as *you are not* your name, it is merely a representation one identifies with and appropriates. Given this, X does very well without you or your life, meaning without the place to which it could return. Conversely, if X does not want your name anymore, or breaks free from it, or chooses for itself another name - that which bears (or has borne) your name is autonomous and powerful enough to live without you. Thus what returns to your name is the ability to disappear in your name, not to return to itself (Derrida 1995: 13).

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

At this point I want to turn to *Circumfession*, where Derrida reveals a personal link between identity and the name.⁴⁷ ‘My secret name’ (Derrida 1993: 87), says Derrida, referring to his second name - Elie - given to him at the time of his circumcision, and not spoken about since:⁴⁸

Elie: my name - not inscribed, the only one, very abstract, that ever happened to me, that I learned, from outside, later, and that I have never felt, borne, the name I do not know, like a number (but what a number! I was going to say matricule, thinking of the plague of the dead Elie that Marquerite wears or of the suicide, in 1955, of my friend Elie Carrive) anonymously designating the hidden name, and in this

⁴⁶ For Derrida, this notion of ownership is challenged by the nature of language and translation (Reynolds and Roffe 2004: 108; see for example Derrida *Differences in Translation* 1985).

⁴⁷ We see this emphasis on names in *Writing and Difference* (2001) too, where Derrida argues that naming simultaneously gives existence and withdraws it at the same time (2001: 70).

⁴⁸ Later on in *Circumfession* Derrida reveals to us the origin of his ‘secret name’; an origin story that was revealed to him on 23 February 1990 (Derrida 1993: 182). We learn that Derrida was named Elie after his uncle, who ‘held me in his arms the day of my circumcision’ (Derrida 1993: 185), and that this uncle was named in memory of his uncle, ‘the brother of my grandfather Abraham, called Elie’ who brought shame on the family: ‘no one ever mentioned again in the family from the day he abandoned his wife and children to make a new life for himself in mainland France’ (Derrida 1993: 185-186).

sense, more than any other, it is the given name, which I received without receiving in the place where what is received must not be received, nor give any sign of recognition in exchange (the name, the gift), but as soon as I learned, very late, that it was my name, I put into it, very distractedly, on one side, in reserve, a certain nobility, a sign of election, I am he who is elected [celui qu'on élit], this joined to the story about the white taleth (to be told elsewhere), and some other signs of secret benediction (12-23-76) (emphasis in original, Derrida 1993: 83-84).

Derrida finds out about his 'secret name', a discovery that had great impact.⁴⁹ It is 'the given name, which I received without receiving in the place where what is received must not be received', and I suspect that this refers to the event of *Brit Milah*, that is his circumcision and induction into Jewish male lineage, and even – insofar as the event of circumcision can double as word – into a vocabulary or language system. For Derrida, much like the first animals under Adam, the name (Elie) is something he '*received without receiving*'. Arguably it is impossible to receive a name, for until one is called by that name it remains untold, a secret, and thus neither called nor received. And again, from the perspective of the primal animals, the moment of being given a name, which was called and received (but could not be responded to), was the moment their *animal-otherness* was reinforced, and underpinned the primal human – animal/other divide. The impossibility of the 'secret name' means that one is denied the opportunity to respond to the call, in effect rendered voiceless.

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

God lets him, Ish, speak on his own, call out on his own, call out and nominate, call out and name, as if he were able to say, "I name," "I call." God lets Ish call the other living things all on his own, give them their names in his own name, these animals that are older and younger than him, these living things that came into the world before him but were named after him, on his initiative according to the second narrative. In both cases, man is in both senses of the word *after* the animal. He follows him. This "after," that determines a sequence, a consequence, or a persecution, is not in time, nor is it temporal; it is the very genesis of time (emphasis in original, Derrida 2004: 386).

Here, Derrida pauses on Ish's naming of the animals as a process of meaning attribution, one that interrupts the chronology of 'creation'. Ish names – and thus knows – the animal that came before him, the animal that Ish came after. This complex relationship between the animal and Ish, who came after the animal and yet named it and knew it (so, the animal predated Ish, saw and knew the world before Ish, and saw the (be)coming of Ish, is now not only named and given meaning by Ish but also because of him), is manifest in Derrida's anecdote of his 'cat encounter': 'The animal is there before me, there close to me, there in front of me-I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me' (Derrida 2004: 380).

⁴⁹ It is worth noting here that Derrida's secret name, Elie, is short for Elijah, who is the patron of circumcision.

As I have shown, Derrida develops a complex account of the relation between naming, call and response. I would like to extend my discussion further by highlighting the word 'mute' in the following quotation in order to demonstrate its significance in the story of Genesis. Derrida confesses to us about feeling 'disarmed before a small mute living being' – his cat (Derrida 2004: 388). I want to bookmark the word 'mute' as it is particularly meaningful in the context of Derrida's narrative on the animal. Indeed, it is on the question of this very 'muteness' that the problem of violence hinges for Derrida. The trace of this muteness, this silence, leads us again to the story of Genesis:

In fact that tradition assigns to nature and to the animality named by Adam a sort of 'deep sadness' (*Traurigkeit*). Such a melancholic mourning would reflect an impossible resignation, as if protesting in silence against the unacceptable fatality of that very silence: the fact of being condemned to muteness (*Stummheit*) and to the absence of language (*Sprachlosigkeit*) (Derrida 2004: 388).

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

When Ish (the first man) was given the responsibility to name the animals - which God created - under God's watchful gaze this act of naming, other than being an act of identification, is also an act of asserting dominance, ownership, and cementing a hierarchical relationship.

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

For so long now it is as if the cat had been recalling itself and recalling that, recalling me and reminding me of this awful tale of Genesis, without breathing a word. Who was born first, before the names? Which one saw the other come to this place so long ago? Who will have been the first occupant, and thus the master? Who the subject? Who has remained the despot, for so long now? (Derrida 2004: 387).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ It seems crucial to note here that Derrida cautions against attributing words to animals, cautions against anthropo-theomorphic reappropriation, cautions about assigning the cat words it has no need for, and over-interpreting what the cat might be saying. By way of clarification, what does anthropo-theomorphic mean? 'Anthropomorphic' means to ascribe human attributes to something non-human such as god or animal, while 'Theomorphic' means to form in the likeness of God. To anthropomorphise - to attribute human behaviours and characteristics non-humans - is to see the human as the basis, the centre to which all else is compared. Thus by using a term such as 'anthropo-theomorphic'

But of course, Derrida's 'little cat' (2004: 374) cannot experience Derrida's nudity as Derrida experiences his own nudity in the face of his little cat. This little cat is always already mute, always already Derrida's other.⁵¹

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

Following from my discussion of Freud and Girard, we see that Derrida's treatment of the Genesis account gives us another way to conceptualise violence. Freud, as we saw, wrote about primordial violence as an event of murder that was not exclusive to prehistory, or a single society. The sacrificial crisis for Freud, the sacrifice of the father by his sons, was an allegorical narrative that tells the story of 'originary violence', the kind that informs sacrificial and commemorative rites. Freud's allegory of the sacrifice of the father by the son outlines a scenario that accounts logically for the constitution of a community in which the members are totalised by their sharing of guilt - the guilt of sacrificing their father - but also the extent to which they are unable to fully enjoy the consequences of their act. And for Girard, the moment of human origin is similarly located in a moment of violence. Intrinsically linked with the moment of primordial violence is the presence of a victim which serves to ground Girard's theory 'in historical and cultural fact' (McKenna 1992: 24). Both Freud and Girard explore the origin

Derrida attempts to *decentre* the human. To attribute the animal with human attributes is to not recognise the animal in its non-human Other, but is instead an attempt to recast the animal as somehow having human behaviour. The risk here is that all categories of 'animal' are erased as we deny the multiplicity of animal species by collating them into one category, 'Animal', which exists in opposition to the 'Human'. The 'animal' is a meaningless generalisation, Derrida argues (2004: 399). In short, Derrida's use of 'anthropo-theomorphic reappropriation' is an attempt to problematise the human/animal binary. It is of course interesting to note that in the term anthropo-theomorphic, we have the attribution of human characteristics on one side and on the other, creating in God's likeness.

⁵¹ As an aside, it is understood that the name of Derrida's little cat is *Logos*.

point of violence, or in other words – the ontology of violence. We considered a different narrative in Derrida. We saw that for Ish, or rather Adam, as for the animals, the event of becoming is always already linked with violence. For Adam, the event of naming is an inflicting of violence, but also, a giving into violence. For the animal, the moment of naming deprives the animal of voice, of language, of word, and simultaneously the sadness of nature and animality are born through this muteness. One might of course argue that one reading of Adam's naming of the animals would be to say that Adam is an external force that violates and yet, is it possible to suggest another way to read this, a reading of greater subtlety. For in 'following' the animal, we can never be entirely certain that this violence is *always* external. And so, rather than violence being a catalyst for - or the outcome of - an event, as in Freud and Girard, we appreciate that Derrida's 'violence of ontology' is commensurate with identity-formation and being, independent of whether it is of the animal or the human. Thus, Derrida contrasts Freud and Girard's 'ontology of violence' with the idea of 'violence as ontology'.

So far, this discussion of Derrida's account of violence has focused on his reading of the story of Genesis. The purpose of this section was to establish links between identity and violence, naming and violence, and to see how the very nature of being as becoming, is violent. Let me now turn to *The Gift of Death* (2007 [1991]) to expand on this discussion of violence as it pertains to 'sacrifice' in Derrida's work. This discussion is important because now, having established the idea of a violence of ontology as distinct from an ontology of violence, I want to prepare the ground for a consideration of circumcision. In short, I want to consider Derrida's conception of sacrifice through one of the oldest stories of sacrifice, the Sacrifice of Isaac, in order to suggest that circumcision can be considered a kind of sacrifice.

Biblical Sacrifice

The Gift of Death (2007 [1991]) is one of Derrida's more sustained works on religion, faith, and responsibility and considers the relation between sacrifice and mortality. In the chapter titled 'Tout autre est tout autre' (translated as 'every other is wholly other'), Derrida addresses the story of Abraham and Isaac in response to Kierkegaard's treatment of the story in *Fear and Trembling* ([1843] 2006). Derrida compares and contrasts his own conception of responsibility with Kierkegaard's in order to extend and deepen his other writings on the gift and sacrifice. For Derrida, the very possibility of sacrifice, especially the ultimate sacrifice of one's own life for the sake of another, comes into question. The sacrifice Derrida speaks of is taken from Genesis 22: the Sacrifice of Isaac.

What I want to do here is touch upon Derrida's critique of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in order to consider how he frames the problem of violence and sacrifice. I wish to consider if Derrida pursues the

idea of an ontology of violence in this text. If so, this will help me to approach the broader problem of the relation between morality and violence in relation to circumcision.

Even though the story of the Sacrifice detailed in Genesis 22 (1-19) is well known, I will offer a concise summary.⁵² God commands Abraham by some test of faith to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. ‘And He said: ‘Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of’⁵³ (Genesis 22: 2). In a show of absolute obedience and faith, Abraham answers God’s call. Together Abraham and Isaac make a three-day journey, each step bringing them closer to the place where Isaac would find death. We can only imagine how heavy those steps were for Abraham, and how light they were for his young son – oblivious to the true purpose of the journey. When they reach their destination, a confused or curious Isaac asks: ‘Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?’ (Genesis 22: 7) to which Abraham replies, ‘God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son’ (Genesis 22: 8). To us, who know of God’s demand, Abraham’s answer is painfully true. God did provide the lamb for sacrifice – Isaac was the son God promised to Sarah and Abraham. And so we have Abraham, the chosen one, the one God had chosen to sign an eternal covenant with (I elaborate on the nature of this covenant in Chapter 3), in his flesh, ensuring protection, land, and livelihood to all his kin, this nomadic shepherd who would become the father of nations, taking a knife to one of his own flock. Other than Abraham’s blind obedience, we are told nothing of his thoughts at the time. Isaac’s voice, which we just heard, becomes suddenly silent: does he resist? Does he weep? Does he plead? We are not told. All we know is the following: ‘and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son’ (Genesis 22: 10-11). Before the knife could strike Isaac, an angel of God appears and calls out to Abraham: ‘And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said: “Abraham, Abraham.” And he said: “Here am I”. And he said: “Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him; for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me”’ (Genesis

⁵² The episode is most frequently conceptualised as an issue of faith in the will of God versus mistrust in the will of God.

⁵³ There is an interesting commentary on this sentence in *Genesis Rabbah* (*Genesis Rabbah* is a compilation of exegesis on the book of *Genesis* by rabbis and sages), which I note by way of anecdote: ‘And he said: Take now thy son - ‘which one?’ ‘Thine only son.’ ‘Each is the only one of his mother?’ ‘Whom thou lovest.’ ‘I love them both: are there limits to one’s emotions?’ Said He to him: ‘Even Isaac.’ God demands that Abraham choose between both his sons and even goes far as to specify: ‘the one you love’. This, Derrida argues in an interview with Yvonne Sherwood, Kevin Hart and John D. Caputo entitled *Epoché and Faith* (2005) is a terrible demand - even before the sacrifice in Mount Moriah Abraham is expected to choose between two equally loved sons (2005: 34-35).

22: 11-12). Here we learn what was behind God's demand of Abraham: it was to test Abraham's faith, devotion, and obedience. At the point that Abraham readies his knife to 'slay his son,' God - seeing that Abraham's faith and obedience are true - sends an angel to stop the sacrifice, and instructs Abraham to sacrifice a nearby ram in Isaac's stead. Abraham follows the angel's orders, and Isaac is spared.

How does Derrida approach this tale? According to Derrida, the binding of Isaac points to 'absolute dissymmetry' in the ethical relationship of Abraham and God (Derrida 2007: 91). Firstly, there is no 'face-to-face' exchange of looks between God and Abraham, 'between the other and myself'. Derrida says: 'God looks at me and I don't see him and it is on the basis of this gaze that singles me out [*ce regard qui me regarde*] that my responsibility comes into being'⁵⁴ (Derrida 2007: 91). Herein is the asymmetry: the gaze that sees me without my seeing it gaze upon me. The asymmetry is present in an imbalance between the one who knows they are being seen though never seeing or knowing their seer. This bears resemblance to the vision of God who observed Adam as he named the animals on earth. Secondly, even as Abraham does not see God's gaze, it becomes his concern - *ce regard qui me regarde* - for Abraham is not only immediately called to respond to God's gaze and demands, but is also made accountable to God's will. It is Abraham who holds the knife to his son's neck. For Abraham to respond to God's will, he must betray the ethics that govern his relationship with his son. Derrida says that 'one is driven to sacrifice by a sort of practical drive, by a form of motivation that is also instinctive, but an instinct that is pure and practical' (Derrida 2007: 91). What Derrida expresses here is the terrible experience of facing and obeying a God who has just posed an 'unjustifiable order' in the name of love, in the name of the person - the son - that you love. Not only is Abraham called to sacrifice his son, according to God's request he must take his son, whom he loves. Thus in the gesture of taking one son to sacrifice there is also a severing in relation to his second son, a son whom, God implies, Abraham does not love. We can think of God's violent demand as follows: Abraham is called to sacrifice not one son, but two - one to God, and the other to love. This choice between sons (the older born Ishmael, son to Hagar, and Isaac, son to Sarah) is an act of terror, Derrida argues. We might even go so far as to call it violent. Abraham realises he must obey this order for which no justification can be provided. Immediately, says Derrida, 'this situation goes beyond any ethical, any human [sic], level' (Derrida interviewed in Caputo, Hart, and Sherwood 2005: 34).⁵⁵ Effectively, God's demand turns

⁵⁴ A brief pause on Derrida's French phrasing. We can also read Derrida's words regarding God's 'gaze': '*ce regard qui me regarde*', as follows: that look [*regard*] becomes my concern [*regarde*]. But also, what I watch – what I *regard* – is my concern, it *matters* to me. Here is where accountability comes into play: what I regard is my regard, that is, for what I see, I am accountable. In seeing you, I am responsible for you.

⁵⁵ 'Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' appears in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (2005). This interview or discussion is conducted with Yvonne Sherwood, Kevin Hart and John Caputo, all theology scholars

Abraham into a criminal - it is at once a crime to disobey God and a crime to obey him. For Derrida, then, violence and sacrifice is articulated through this happening: Abraham is a murderer. Even as an angel of God is sent down, calling: 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad', following from which Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw behind him a ram 'caught in the thicket by his horns' which he offered up for a burnt-offering instead of Isaac. Even following the release of Isaac, Abraham is a murderer. It is as if Abraham murdered his son, even if the action did not take place. It does not matter that Abraham did not end up executing his son, for he had every intention to do so. In Abraham's response to God lies his responsibility. No matter what decision Abraham ended up making, each one would involve a betrayal of ethics. Thus the concept of responsibility is in its essence incoherent, unknown, an 'ordeal of the undecidable' (Derrida 2007: 5). In other words, Abraham chose to respond with ethics towards God, over his ethical commitments to his kin:

Abraham accepts that the relation with God is wholly asymmetrical, that God can say to him, "I elect you in order that you elect one of your sons, you must elect him as the one you love. You must love him more than the other in order to kill him." Here we have the experience of a terrible duty. To act in obedience to God you must give up any justification, any humanly intelligible justification. You have to give up having any knowledge of the decision (Derrida interviewed in Caputo, Hart, and Sherwood 2005: 35).

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

Thus, for Derrida, this story demonstrates that ethics is precisely not the universal, but rather the private, the singular, the unjustifiable. The story of Isaac is a perfect iteration of this statement: it tells the story of a father who intended to sacrifice his son on God's demand. In this case, Abraham has always already committed a crime - regardless of what he would have done. This allows Derrida to observe that ethics is ungrounded, metaphysically and rationally; an ethical decision is that which cannot be communicated or justified in universal terms (Goldman 1998: 9). This is because ethics

who have spent a significant portion of their careers to thinking with Derrida. This interview is a wonderful discussion, often polemical, on faith and religion for Derrida. To be sure, Derrida was an immensely prolific writer. However there is something very genuine and playful that comes off in his interviews and conversations, which is why I refer to these sources in addition to his published manuscripts.

begins with the other. This point is dependent upon Derrida's assertion in *The Gift of Death* that 'every other (one) is every (bit) other' (Caputo, Hart, and Sherwood 2005: 68). The reason every other one is so completely other is because, for Derrida, every other is secret and mysterious; there is always an element of unknowability.

My discussion here has been an effort to consider the questions of 'where does violence begin? When does violence begin?' These questions are inspired by the questions that Derrida poses in *Of Grammatology* (1997): '[w]here does writing begin? When does writing begin?' (Derrida 1997: 74). My discussion of Derrida has allowed me to propose another way of thinking about violence that is not limited to a point in time or a historical event, for he allows us to consider the possibility of a violence of ontology at the heart of the being becoming of identity and an ethics that is unjustifiable in universal terms. I now want to ask if we can think of this violence as indelibly entwined with identity, body, and becoming? What are the moral and ethical ramifications of this discussion with regards to circumcision?

If, as Derrida implies, identity is deeply informed by violence, then identity is continually shaped and (re)constituted by violence in profound ways. Put differently, violence is linked to identity, and to being. The very process of becoming being, becoming self, is in itself always already violent. This is because identity is a process – it happens over and over, a continuous ongoing happening: it is violent because this becoming being is already linked to identity and to the other. In specific terms, violence is the means through which identity is constituted. This observation allows me to claim that the key elements of the circumcision ritual reflect the connections between writing, identity and violence in subsequent chapters. But first, I wish to consider violence as it relates to circumcision.

Manichaeon Violence Reconsidered

My discussion of Derrida makes it possible to argue that conceptualisations of violence which depend on externality and opposition, what I have called 'Manichaeon violence', insufficiently encapsulate the generative facet of violence and misunderstand the nature of a moral and ethical response. Consequently, I wish to replace the concept of 'ontology of violence' articulated in the works of Freud and Girard with the idea of a 'violence of ontology'. I want to link the violence of ontology to the becoming being of bodies.⁵⁶ In this regard, it is, and perhaps must necessarily be

⁵⁶ Etymologically, 'violence' is derived from the Latin *violentia*, which means vehemence and impetuosity. These words have a strong association with 'forcefulness' and 'intensity', but also 'spiritedness' and 'passion'. Violence is

linked with identity. In subsequent chapters, I use the ritual of Jewish circumcision as a case study to consider how violence is produced in, and by, the very becoming of bodies. It is useful to refer to Jewish circumcision as a case study because it illustrates my argument with clear and exact terms and is embedded in a grammar of identity, ethics, and violence.

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

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

Before proceeding, there are some issues regarding violence of ontology that I would like to acknowledge from the outset. I recognise that by putting forward this theory, one possible criticism is that I have done away with the notion of 'the victim'. While my understanding of violence is linked to the being becoming, understood as an iterative process, without a point of origin or conclusion, it could be argued that I am diminishing the power, place, gravitas of normative violence, and in this same gesture, therefore sacrificing the notion of the victim. This is potentially dangerous as it erases

not stagnant, sterile, or still. It is in motion, and it calls into motion. Recall Sofsky's argument above that rituals are transformative. As we will see in subsequent chapters, I argue that violence can be transformative, too.

the notion of victimhood - a very real, lived, and painful experience. But this distorts my argument. What I am in fact suggesting is that the Manichaean framework is not the sole framework through which violence manifests. Specifically, Manichaean approaches to violence do not – and should not – exhaust our conception of what violence is. Rather it enables us to consider violence in a certain way, with certain parameters, relevant to certain scenarios. Violence can be ontological, just as ontology – as I’ve shown in my discussion of Derrida – can be violent. In my view, it is possible to think of a kind of violence that is linked to a being becoming meaning, and this meaning is made possible through violence. Viewed from this perspective, I think we are able to better navigate the process of being becoming in the world.

My discussion of the ontology of violence and the violence of ontology enables an opening up or widening of our conception of being becoming. If we are to use morality as a means to respond to violence, then morality is already embedded within violence itself. Rather than morality being necessarily external to violence, a response to it, I wish to argue that they are mutually constitutive. By this I mean that violence can never be deferred or externalised as it is always already present. Now, discourse on the morality and ethics of circumcision is shaped by a general commitment to – and thinking through – Manichaean violence. The assumption is that circumcision is unethical because it violates moral codes. The procedure of circumcision is framed by a Manichaean perspective on right and wrong. Simply put, circumcision is considered unethical because to inflict a cut, a wound, is itself immoral and hence unethical. Thus the argument regarding circumcision is that it is negative, harmful, and unethical. As a logical consequence, the only seemingly ethical response available is to not circumcise.

This picture helps me to consider the dilemma of the morality and ethics of male circumcision in particular, and to consider the nature of identity in general.⁵⁷ For it enables me to bring into relief the perspective of anti-circumcision activists, one that will be discussed at length in the next chapter. This perspective holds that circumcision is a violent procedure that violates the integrity and wholeness of the body. Because the infant cannot consent to the procedure, circumcision is an infringement of agency. This view advances a ‘Manichaean violence’. But as I have suggested, to dismiss violence – all violence – as something that is always negative and offensive, as something which must be protected against, even guarded against, is to understand violence in a restrictive sense.

⁵⁷ Theories of violence often break the terms down and speak of violence in several senses: physical, psychological, emotional and conceptual (Bishop and Phillips 2006: 377). However, one thing we can deduce from the etymology of violence above is that such assumptions of violence are somewhat banal: they don’t account for that liveliness, passionate, vehement and transformative expression of violence indicated at in the etymological roots of the word.

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

Chapter 2. Conceptualising Circumcision

Introduction

Previously we observed several theoretical approaches to the notion of violence: from contemporary theorist Wolfgang Sofsky for whom violence is a social phenomenon, to Sigmund Freud and René Girard, for whom violence and sacrifice are foundational in the evolution of human societies. We concluded with Jacques Derrida, for whom violence is tied in with notions of responsibility, naming, ethics and undecidability. For the moment we will leave aside his considerations of the violence of ontology because we have not yet considered the question of how circumcision is generally considered in relation to violence. Circumcision is practiced for religious and secular reasons. In Judaism circumcision originates in a request from God: this is in fact the Biblical premise for the rite. The continuous reproduction of circumcision on – and by – Jewish male bodies for centuries has cemented its significance as a socio-cultural activity.⁵⁸ Because of this ancient heritage of circumcision as a Jewish rite of passage, circumcision can be thought of as synonymous with ‘identity,’ ‘community,’ and ‘belonging’.⁵⁹ But circumcision is also proliferate in secular societies, and has been for decades. This chapter concentrates on the secular debates about circumcision. In subsequent chapters, we will consider Jewish ritual circumcision in more detail and return to Derrida’s violence of ontology. Here, I introduce the primary stakeholders and outline the terms of the current circumcision debate. We consider how circumcision became such common practice, and how it came to dominate medical ethics, especially in the USA. But popular views on circumcision go beyond the religious: in the USA in particular, circumcision is a procedure that was established in the early twentieth century as an integral component to hospital births (Silverman 2006: 214). Not only is circumcision one of the most frequently performed surgical procedures worldwide (Cagno 2012); we are beginning to appreciate that it is also one of the most divisive. The topic is the subject of considerable dispute among medical professionals, ethicists, and other academics. Such debates will often centre on the medical necessity of neonatal male circumcision

⁵⁸ The association between circumcision and Judaism is complex. It is not just in their eyes that Jews came to define their community and religion through circumcision. ‘Ironically,’ writes Jewish anthropologist Eric Kline Silverman, ‘it is Christianity and not Judaism that indelibly etched circumcision on the Jewish body and fostered a preoccupation with the prepuce’ (Silverman 2006: 145). Silverman is referring to a history of anti-Semitism spearheaded by a Christianity that rejected Jewish custom and tradition. It can be argued that one can think of the Christian role of identifying circumcision with Jews as being anti-Semitic.

⁵⁹ On the matter of identity, it is worth noting here that during the circumcision ceremony in Judaism the boy receives his name. More on this in Chapter 3.

and weigh the medical (in)validity of the procedure together with any cultural and religious significance associated with it. Increasingly we are seeing the language of medicine and ethics enter the debate on Jewish ritual circumcision, which has traditionally taken its moral legitimacy from religion, faith and custom. The entry of this language into Jewish tradition is potentially problematic for conceptual and religious reasons, as it involves the Jewish ritual of circumcision in a debate whose terms are quite foreign to it, thus limiting the scope of discussion.

This chapter proceeds as follows: As secular views on circumcision tend to be framed in medical terms, I first approach circumcision from a medical perspective. I move to consider if there any conceptual problems in approaching circumcision as pathology? What might an alternative be? From here, we consider two key stakeholder groups that currently drive debate on circumcision: circumcision advocates (activists) and anti-circumcision activists (intactivists). My aim is to identify what logics organise these groups with respect to their position on circumcision and with how they conceptualise violence in relation to circumcision. In what ways do these groups' rationalities of circumcision differ?

I will argue that each group adopts an argument that functions as a 'trump card'. I borrow the phrase from card games in which one suit outranks the others. I do so in order to highlight the way that these groups each identify a decisive, overriding factor in their arguments 'for' or 'against' circumcision. For advocates of circumcision, the trump is 'health', and for opponents of circumcision, it is 'autonomy'.⁶⁰ I will explore how these trump cards are established and their application in circumcision discourse. This requires me to delve into the secular circumcision debate, its historical background, and analyse the values the various groups hold dear. As I will show, a key point of difference between religious and secular stakeholders is in their conceptualisation of violence. I will turn to consider Jewish ritual circumcision in the next chapter.

What is circumcision?

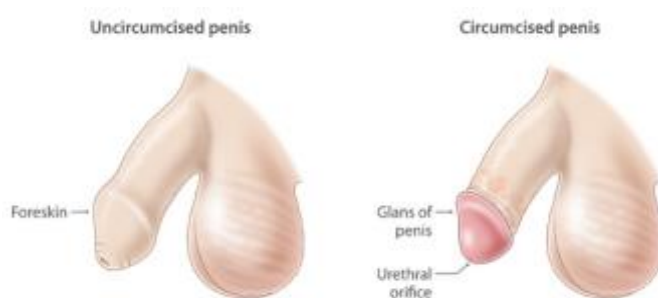
In simple terms, circumcision is a surgical procedure whereby the foreskin is removed from the penis glans. Secular arguments for circumcision rely on medical and pathological descriptions of circumcision and herein one of my key concerns with contemporary discourse on circumcision emerges: that of conceptualising circumcision strictly as a medical procedure. As we shall see, the

⁶⁰ In the case of ritual circumcision, the trump card is 'religion' which is tied to 'culture'. Specifically in the case of the Jewish ritual, however, I intend to argue that what drives the practice is not so clear. We will expand more on this Jewish ritual circumcision in Chapter 3.

procedure tends to be framed in *pathological* terms. Consequently, circumcision is often considered primarily as a medical procedure and as something that is either necessary to avoid medical harm or something that needs to be treated, even corrected (the foreskin restoration movement is one clear example). To this end, there is a tendency for circumcised bodies to be pathologised. For intactivists, circumcised bodies are often considered abnormal, damaged and lacking as they diverge from the ‘integral’, ‘whole’ and ‘intact’ body. Circumcision fragments the body and compromises its intactness. For activists, bodies that are not circumcised tend to be pathologised insofar as they are observed in terms of ‘preventative’ health and medicine. Activists perceive circumcision as a surgical procedure with numerous medical benefits such that the decision to circumcise is seemingly obligatory to ensure public health. Through the course of this dissertation, I will go on to show that bodies are not ‘only’ pathological, and circumcision is not ‘only’ a medical procedure.

In medical terms, male circumcision refers to the surgical removal of the foreskin, also known as the prepuce, from the human penis (See image 1). The prepuce is a specialised erogenous tissue in both males and females (Cold and Taylor 1999: 41). In males the prepuce is also known as a foreskin, and is a common anatomical feature of male genitalia.⁶¹ It is generally accepted that the biological purpose of the foreskin is to protect the penis glans by decreasing external irritation or contamination. In this sense, the foreskin is similar to the ‘eyelids, labia minora, anus and lips’ in its function (Cold and Taylor 1999: 34).

Image 1. Uncircumcised and circumcised penis



Raising Children Network (2015) ‘What is circumcision?’ (<http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/circumcision.html/context/644> Viewed 15 August 2016).

Some researchers view the foreskin as a redundant piece of skin, and argue that its removal has no negative effects on sexual function (see for example Morris, Waskett, and Gray 2012; Morris et al.

⁶¹ In female anatomy, in contrast, the prepuce is the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris. Anatomically, the female prepuce serves a similar function to the male prepuce (Cold and Taylor 1999).

2012; Krieger et al. 2008; Morris 2007). Others hold the opposite view and argue that, the foreskin is a ‘primary, erogenous tissue necessary for normal sexual function’ (Cold and Taylor 1999: 41);⁶² others describe the foreskin as the most sensitive part of the penis (Darby and Svoboda 2007; Johnson 2010; Bronselaer et al. 2013). To this end, removing the foreskin could have ramifications for sexual experiences. Some studies argue that the adult foreskin contains the highest concentration of erogenous nerve endings in the penis and thus, serves not only a protective role, but also has a sensory and sexual function.⁶³ Anatomically in adult males, the prepuce is generally relaxed and flexible, however in neonates the prepuce has not yet naturally separated from the glans (Cold and Taylor 1999: 35). Thus in the case of neonatal male circumcision, the procedure involves tearing the prepuce and glans penis mucosa apart in the process of separating the foreskin from the glans. This procedure has the potential concomitant risk of damage and injury to the glans (Cold and Taylor 1999: 35; Sawyer 2011: 555).

Several methods and devices may be used for non-ritual circumcision.⁶⁴ Three frequently used devices are the Mogen-type clamp, the Gomco-type clamp and the Plastibell clamp (see image 2). The latter two devices crush the foreskin, which is then either cut off if using the Gomco-type clamp,

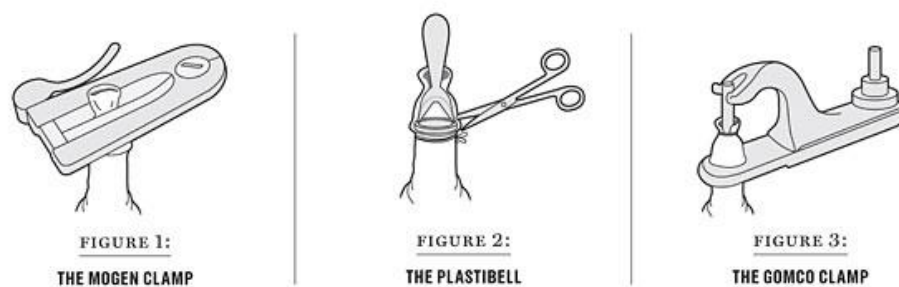
⁶² The matter of circumcision’s impact on sexual drive and pleasure is disputed in medical literature. A study published in 2007 surveyed 163 circumcised and non-circumcised men by objectively measuring penile sensitivity. The study aimed to map the fine-touch pressure thresholds of the penis and to quantify the differences in penile sensitivity between men with and without foreskins (Sorrells et al. 2007: 864-865). The study found that the glans in the circumcised male is less sensitive to fine-touch pressure than the glans of the uncircumcised male. The most sensitive location on the circumcised penis is the circumcision scar on the ventral surface. Five locations on the uncircumcised penis that are routinely removed at circumcision were more sensitive than the most sensitive location on the circumcised penis (Sorrells et al. 2007: 867). Comparatively, Laumann et al. (1997) reported that uncircumcised men were actually more prone to having sexual difficulties than their circumcised peers. In 2002, Collins et al. released a study of 15 men who need to be circumcised for medical reasons relating to phimosis. In their conclusion to this study, the authors argued that ‘circumcision does not appear to have adverse, clinically important effects on male sexual function in sexually active adults who undergo the procedure’ (Collins et al. 2002: 2112). We must consider that Collins et al. are talking about men who opted for circumcision for medical reasons, as well as their small survey quantity of 15 men. In contrast, the study conducted by Fink et al. (2002) examined a total of 123 men both before and after their circumcision to gain a better understanding of sexual function outcomes. Fink et al. conclude that adult circumcision appears to result in worsened erectile function, decreased penile sensitivity, but reported no change in sexual activity and improved satisfaction. Of the study’s participants, 50 per cent reported benefits and 38 per cent reported harm. Overall, 62 per cent of men were satisfied with having been circumcised (Fink et al. 2002: 2115). What these studies reveal, among other things, is that it is difficult to quantify matters of pleasure and satisfaction. Although circumcision does alter the physiology of the penis by removing erogenous tissue, doctors and researchers are not in agreement as to the consequences for sexual function.

⁶³ A recent cross-sectional Danish survey found that circumcision was associated with frequent orgasm difficulties in Danish men. Female partners of the participants were also surveyed, and reported sexual difficulties as well, notably orgasm difficulties, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse) and a sense of incomplete sexual needs fulfilment (Frisch 2011; Frisch et al. 2011).

⁶⁴ I should note that Judaism strictly prohibits circumcision with any device that crushes the foreskin, thus the Gomco and Mogen clamps cannot be used in a Jewish circumcision ritual (Weisberg 2002).

or in the case of the Plastibell, the device remains in place and the foreskin falls off after a few days (Morris 1999). Both the Gomco-type clamp and the Plastibell use a device that protects the glans during removal of the foreskin. The Gomco-type clamp is the most frequently used tool for routine neonatal circumcision (Cagno and Gordon 2012). However, Jewish ritual circumcision uses other devices such as scissors, a knife, and mosquito clamps (see image 3).⁶⁵

Image 1. Surgical circumcision devices



Right to left: the Gomco clamp, the Plastibell, and the Mogen clamp. Illustration by Kagan McLeod and Jonathon Rivait in Bonanos, Christopher (2009) 'Anatomy of a Circumcision' in *New York Magazine* (<http://nymag.com/health/features/60140/> Viewed 15 August 2016).

⁶⁵ I sought to bring the reader images of circumcision devices to illustrate the difference in mechanisms of circumcision between secular and Jewish practices. However here I encountered some difficulty: there weren't many images that just presented the different circumcision implements. Even after a consultation with a research librarian and tips on various databases and photobanks, the predominant images that came up were visceral, bloody, and graphic. These images would simply serve as a distraction. Underlying these images is a specific message on circumcision, and the logic of including these graphic images undermines the logic of the argument I want to present. Indeed, I am not denying circumcision is violent, for it *is* violent. However, how can I approach circumcision as text when such images already present it as either black or white? I want the reader to keep in mind an openness with respect to circumcision, hence in the end I opted for one of only two images I found that simply illustrated the various kinds of circumcision devices without any added narrative.

Image 3. Jewish ritual circumcision instruments



Top: mosquito clamps. Right: scissors. Bottom: a knife. "Milah instruments" by DRosenbach/Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Milah_instruments.jpg#/media/File:Milah_instruments.jpg Viewed 15 August 2016).

The landscape of a predicament

We see that there are several ways to actually perform a circumcision, but for what reasons? What motivates parents to circumcise their boys or adults to undergo the procedure themselves? It is well known that circumcision has been performed for centuries for a host of ritual, cultural, and medical reasons. It is difficult to conclusively define the motives for circumcision in preliterate societies, however some suggestions include: improving male hygiene, rites of passage, blood sacrifice, or a cultural marking (van Gennep 1969). Today, the routine circumcision of infant males is often associated with Judaism. The ritual cutting of male genitals – either in the form of the circumcision described above or another form⁶⁶ – is also practiced by followers of Islam and among certain aboriginal tribes in Africa and Australia as a rite of passage into manhood (Sawyer 2011: 555; Róheim 1945; Dunsmuir and Gordon 1999). Interestingly, there has been an increase in rates of circumcision in non-traditional societies such as in North America. In fact, the proliferation of circumcision in non-traditional societies has informed much of the terms of the current circumcision debate. This is particularly evident in the United States of America, where infant male circumcision was in 2007 ‘the most common medical procedure in the USA’ according to Sorrells et al. (Sorrells

⁶⁶ The amount of tissue removed may vary. Some forms of circumcision remove only the excess foreskin, without peeling the tissue back and excising it all. Some Australian Aboriginal communities practice subincision. The operation consists essentially in the slitting open of the whole or of a portion of the penile urethra along the ventral or under surface of the penis. The initial cut is generally about an inch long, but this may be subsequently enlarged so as to extend from the glans to the root of the scrotum. In this way the whole of the under part of the urethra is laid open (Ashley-Montagu 1937; Róheim 1945; Cawte and Djagamara 1966; Singer and Desole 1967).

et al. 2007: 864). The prevalence of circumcision as a routine, medical, non-ritualistic practice in the USA is the primary reason there is such widespread medical and ethical debate about circumcision.

And yet, it is important to note that the proliferation of circumcision is not unique to the USA or to Jews. According to UNAIDS and the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that approximately 30 per cent of males worldwide are circumcised⁶⁷ (UNAIDS and WHO 2008). This figure is based on the most detailed analysis to date, carried out by the WHO in 2007.

Predominantly, circumcision is practiced within the context of tribal or religious traditions.⁶⁸

Terms of the contemporary circumcision debate

Contemporary debate on neonatal circumcision is found in literature spanning numerous disciplines such as medicine, ethics, medical and social research, sociology and anthropology, to name but a select few. Generally, these debates take clear sides, leaving little to no room for moral ambiguity. One common way these debates unfold is through a sort of ‘cost-benefit’ analysis, if you will, that weighs up the ethical, medical, or religious or cultural arguments about circumcision with the intention of coming to a recommended conclusion. One notable example is an article by ethicists Michael Benatar and David Benatar entitled: ‘Between prophylaxis and child abuse: the ethics of neonatal male circumcision’ published in the *American Journal of Bioethics* (2003). This article generated a fair bit of resistance in the intactivist camp.⁶⁹ Benatar and Benatar analyse the positions that opponents to circumcision take on conceptual issues such as ‘mutilation’, ‘informed consent’ and ‘pain’ to medical variables such as ‘urinary tract infection’, ‘STIs’ and ‘HIV’, and weigh these arguments against any benefits circumcision might have. The authors offer what they argue is a ‘balanced outline of the evidence’ (2003: 36), and conclude with a *cost benefit analysis*.

This kind of ‘cost benefit analysis’ is a basic strategy adopted by parties to the contemporary circumcision debate. To understand what this means, let’s take ‘informed consent’ as an example.

⁶⁷ In regards to female genital modification (FGM), the WHO estimates that between 100 and 140 million girls worldwide have been subjected to FGM (WHO 2010).

⁶⁸ Circumcision is common practice among many disparate cultures and takes many forms (Morris 1999). In the UK, Australia and US foreskin removal was practiced for medical reasons. While the UK and Australia ceased to exercise non-discriminatory circumcision from the 1950s and 1970s respectively (Darby 2005), in the US and South Korea, routine neonatal male circumcision is one of the most common medical procedures (Glick 2005; Pang, Kim and Kim 2001: 61). Female and male excision during childhood and early adulthood is prevalent among North Africans of Muslim and Christian faith (Abu-Sahlieh 2001). Tribal circumcision and sub-incision is conducted among adult males in South Africa and among Indigenous Australians (Singer and Desole 1967).

⁶⁹ Various intactivists contributed to a response to Benatar and Benatar which can be found at ‘Rebuttal to the Benetars’ defence of circumcision’ on the website *Circumstitions* (<http://www.circumstitions.com/ethics-benatars.html>, Viewed 1 July 2016)

Intactivists argue that children lack the capacity to consent to circumcision; hence appropriate consent cannot be obtained. They argue that parents are entitled to consent on behalf of their children only when the surgical procedure is medically necessary. As there is no pressing medical need for the circumcision of children, it is not only unnecessary but it can be considered a form of assault. Benatar and Benatar ask, 'is it really true that parents are morally entitled to authorize medical interventions only for clear and immediate medical necessity?' (2003: 37). In response to this question they bring the example of vaccination. They argue that there are parts of the world where children are vaccinated against diseases that are now uncommon, and so 'the necessity of such vaccination for any individual child is neither clear nor immediate' (2003: 37). In addition, vaccines carry minor risks and side effects, and death in rare cases, yet we do not seek to obtain informed consent from children for their vaccination. We agree that parents are the proxy decision makers. The authors argue it would not make sense to wait with vaccinations until 'informed consent' may be obtained as delaying vaccinations might undermine much of their benefits. To this end, the 'role of a parent is not simply to save children from immediate catastrophe, but is to protect and foster a child's long-term best interests' (2003: 37). And so, with regards to circumcision, a similar argument follows: 'there are costs to delaying circumcision until adulthood' the ethicists argue (2003: 37). 'At the very least, circumcision may be psychologically unpleasant in adults in a way that it is not in infants. Moreover, the risks are greater in adults' (2003: 37). Benatar and Benatar conclude their paper by arguing that while circumcision is not a compelling prophylactic measure, it is neither a form of child abuse. This leads the authors to argue that non-medically essential circumcision of infant boys is an appropriate issue for parental discretion and that '[i]n exercising that discretion, religious and cultural factors, though preferably subject to critical evaluation, may reasonably play a role' (2003: 45).⁷⁰

The concept of cost-benefit analysis of circumcision appears to depend then on the ability to quantify the terms of debate. But some questions immediately come to mind: what is the weight of 'ethics', 'culture,' 'medicine,' 'tradition' or 'faith' when measured against the other? How does one evaluate which one weighs more? Is there a scale of importance, and if so, how is this scale determined? Indeed, is it even possible to measure and evaluate what these terms represent in the first instance? These are preliminary questions, and by asking them, my intention is to highlight the emergent tension in debates around circumcision. As we will see, the very terms and points of

⁷⁰ For some further examples of cost-benefit analyses of circumcision see Mazor (2013) and Ben-Yami (2013).

reference employed by parties of the debate operate on different, and ultimately incommensurate registers.

First, circumcision advocates or activists tend to rely on medical reasoning to justify their claims. In their vocabulary, ‘health’ relates to the body’s state of wellness, but also in a broader sense extends beyond one’s body and relates to public health. It is a term mostly mobilised by pro-circumcision advocates, who build their case for circumcision around its imperative as a health measure to help curb rates of HIV, penile cancer, urinary tract infections (UTIs) in infants, and other afflictions that we consider in more depth below. To this end, the health and wellness of an individual’s body is placed in direct relation to other bodies such that circumcision becomes articulated as a public health measure. For instance, prominent circumcision activists David Cooper, Alex Wodak and Brian Morris argue that circumcision is fundamental to combating the spread of HIV. They write that ‘[c]ircumcision of males is now referred to by many as a “surgical vaccine” against a wide variety of infections and adverse medical conditions over the lifetime’ (Cooper et al. 2010: 318).

Circumcision is crucial not only for protecting one’s body from infectious diseases such as HIV, but there’s a pressing public health measure: ‘The public health benefits include protection not just from sexually transmitted HIV, but also from some common sexually transmitted infections and other conditions’ (Cooper et al. 2010: 318-319).

Second, intactivists tend to rely on arguments that draw on human rights and bodily experience, often partnered with testimonies of men who underwent circumcision as infants, parents, and healthcare workers.⁷¹ The language of ‘autonomy’ relates to the individual’s right to make decisions about their own selves. This notion has deep roots in the philosophical tradition of liberalism. One good example is found in John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1975) which claims that ‘over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign’ (Mill 1975: 11). If we accept an equivalency between personal sovereignty and autonomy, it is possible to demonstrate that ‘autonomy’ is utilised by intactivists to claim that fundamentally, no one but the person in question should decide about whether he should be circumcised or not. This position implies that one’s body, and here, their genitalia, should be free from the control of others. For example, in the words of intactivist J. Steven

⁷¹ This is not to say that intactivists don’t draw on medical research in their arguments. To the contrary: there is extensive medical research that suggests that circumcision is not an effective health strategy, contra to arguments made by circumcision activists. Some urologists argue, for example, that the foreskin is an erogenous tissue and its removal has ramifications for sexual pleasure. Predominantly, however, those in the pro-circumcision camp draw heavily on medical research, as it is the centre of their argument, while intactivists mobilise terms from the realm of human rights, such as ‘autonomy’.

Svoboda: ‘Genital autonomy is a unified principle that children should be protected from genital cutting that is not medically necessary’ (Svoboda 2012: 1).

Granted, a comparison between medical views on circumcision to the lived experience of those who have a personal relationship with circumcision might seem unfair, or at the very least odd: can one really compare an argument from medical research with an argument from experience? Yet this is exactly the point. I argue that in the debate on circumcision there is often a ‘winning argument’, a trump card if you will, that tips the scale to make circumcision permissible in one instance and impermissible in the next. Naturally, the nature of the trump differs depending on which side of the argument one is located. The commitment of each side to their cause has rendered the debate two-sided.

In the next two sections, I will show that health (activists) and autonomy (intactivists) are the moral principles that govern the circumcision debate. This is not to say that health and autonomy capitalise the circumcision debate or that they are clearly present in every argument. Instead, I want to show that when these arguments regarding circumcision are broken down, the underlying concern for activists and intactivists is that the respective values of health and autonomy be upheld. Activists and intactivists tend to rely on these trumps to close down debate. My goal is to demonstrate how these trumps serve to moralise the terms of debate in relation to a perceived violence or harm. Doing so will help me to consider alternative ways of conceptualising circumcision in relation to the violence of ontology in subsequent chapters.

Circumcision, health, autonomy: Activists and Intactivists

Neonatal male circumcision is one of the most divisive topics in modern medicine (Fox and Thomson 2009; Earp 2013; Merkel and Putzk 2013). Debates on the ethics and legalities of non-therapeutic infant circumcision have grown exponentially in the past years (Earp 2013). Medically, some authors cite significant benefits to infant health from circumcision. Indeed, some have gone as far as to suggest that circumcision is a biomedical imperative for the twenty-first century (Morris 2007), and urge for routine neonatal circumcision to be standard medical procedure (see for example Morris 1999; Morris et al. 2012b; Morris et al. 2012a; Cooper et al. 2010; Morris 2007). And yet, there are others who argue that the medical data is inconclusive at best, and that circumcision may hinder, reduce, or completely damage sexual stimulation (see for example Earp 2013; Hofvander 2002; Denniston et al. 2004; Denniston et al. 2001; Denniston et al. 1999; Frisch et al. 2011; Cold and Taylor 1999). Some suggest that the circumcision of infants is a human rights abuse, blatantly unethical, and verges on criminal activity (see for example Darby and Svoboda 2007;

Boyle et al. 2000; Svoboda 2012; Abu-Sahlieh 1994). In addition to the medical, legal and ethical arguments that underpin these views, discussion about circumcision can often be emotionally charged, even personal. I begin with circumcision activists followed by the intactivist movement.

Circumcision advocates: activists

Circumcision activists are people who advocate for circumcision as a physical and – as I argue – a health measure. The pro circumcision movement is diverse and includes laypersons, researchers, and physicians (among others)⁷² who unite under the conviction that neonatal male circumcision is a necessary, viable, and recommended surgical procedure.⁷³ Circumcision activists heavily use medical science to support their claims, citing research that claims circumcision is efficient in combating the global AIDS epidemic as it reduces HIV transmission. I will show that ‘health’ is presented as a trump card that serves to moralise conduct and shut down debate. As stated in CIRCLIST, a popular online pro-circumcision resource, ‘[o]ur task in the pro-circ [sic] lobby is to ensure that our side of the case is adequately presented and not drowned out as the opposition would wish (and, indeed, attempt to do)’ (Circlist 2014).⁷⁴ CIRCLIST suggests that the intactivist movement works

⁷² Some notable pro-circumcision advocates are Edgar Schoen, Brian Morris, Bertran Auvert and Robert Bailey. These last two individuals are known for their research on the correlation between HIV and male circumcision in Africa. Morris is notorious for his pro-circumcision stance, and is Australia’s most vocal circumcision advocate. So much so, that one of the reviewers of Morris’ *In Favour of Circumcision* wrote critically: ‘Professor Morris is a man on a mission to rid the world of the male foreskin’ (Donovan in Morris 1999: 68). Morris writes about ‘Circumcision as a biological imperative for the 21st century’ and states that ‘circumcision of males represents a surgical “vaccine” against a wide variety of infections, adverse medical conditions and potentially fatal diseases over their lifetime’ (Morris 2007: 147) with the added benefit of protecting sexual partners. While Morris is a prolific pro-circumcision activist, he is also a highly controversial figure who has been accused of academic misconduct. He has been accused of veiled self-referencing and citing his own letters to editors as evidence of published research (Van Howe and Svoboda 2013; Earp 2013). It has been recently documented in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* that Morris has also been accused of disregarding the norm of confidentiality in the peer-review process and of pressuring journal editors to reject well-conducted studies if they suggest that circumcision may be harmful. Responding to one recent episode, a Danish sexual health researcher reported that Morris had been a ‘particularly discourteous reviewer who went to extremes to prevent our study from being published. In an email, Morris ... called people on his mailing list to arms against our study, openly admitting that he was the reviewer and that he had tried to get the paper rejected.... Breaking unwritten confidentiality and courtesy rules of the peer-review process, Morris distributed his slandering criticism of our study to people working for the same cause’ (Frisch 2013). Perhaps ironically, Morris is fond of complaining that much of the literature against circumcision is based on personal opinions, is uninformed, and has not gone through peer-review (see Morris 1999, 2007). Additionally, Dr Terry Allen, one of the pro-circumcision lobbyists for a new American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) policy statement on circumcision, was distressed that the 1975 AAP statement did not consider circumcision favourably and together with Edgar Schoen – who is outspokenly pro-circumcision – authored most of the 1989 AAP ‘Report of the Ad Hoc Task Force on Circumcision.’

⁷³ It should be noted that many pro-circumcision activists outspokenly oppose the genital modification of females. They refuse any comparison on the grounds that there is medical justification for male circumcision, whereas FGM serves solely as a manifestation of patriarchal control over the female body, and to diminish if not entirely eliminate the experience of sexual pleasure.

⁷⁴ While CIRCLIST describes itself as a site for circumcision information, it curiously has an entire section dedicated to circumcision photography, which has significantly more content than any other page on their website, and

towards drowning out the voice of pro-circumcision activists.⁷⁵ This may be so, but there is no argument that the pro-circumcision lobby is not a vocal and powerful one especially in the USA where the majority of infant boys are circumcised just after birth. In the following discussion, I will outline four aspects of the pro-circumcision argument: first, the medicalization of circumcision; second, the moralisation of ‘sexual health’; third, the fear of HIV transmission; and four, the social responsabilisation of health.

1. *The medicalisation of circumcision*

We can trace the introduction of circumcision into medical discourse to 1870. According to historian David Gollaher, the date when ‘medical history of circumcision in the United States properly begins’ is February 9, 1870 (1994: 5). In his essay ‘From Ritual to Science: The Medical Transformation of Circumcision in America’ (1994), Gollaher goes on to describe how, on that day, Dr Lewis A. Sayre – who was at that time, America’s leading orthopaedic surgeon – received a letter urging him to consult on a peculiar medical case. Sayre attended the case, and reported that the patient was ‘a most beautiful little boy of five years of age, but exceedingly white and delicate in his appearance, unable to walk without assistance or stand erect, his knees being flexed at about an angle of 45 degrees’ (Sayre 1870: online).⁷⁶ Sayre was perplexed by the boy’s paralysis, which was not due

features the following statement: ‘CIRCLIST welcomes interesting, relevant photographs depicting circumcision. However, we need something more informative than “Here’s a picture of my willy!”’ (Circlist 2014: Online). The authors subsequently outline what the photography submission guidelines are (there we learn that ‘images depicting bondage, sado-masochism or body modifications other than circumcision are ‘unlikely to be archived’). The section ‘Legality Checklist (with special reference to nudity)’ opens with the admission that ‘This topic is a minefield!’ and continues to explain, under the heading ‘Depiction of the Genitalia of Minors,’ that ‘In most countries this is not illegal *per se*, but several strict rules nevertheless tend to apply.’ The authors provide the following advice, which I reproduce in full: ‘For our particular purpose, the image must relate to circumcision and its inclusion must not be gratuitous. There must be no sexual content, even as innuendo. It must not be possible to identify the boy. Stating the country is both relevant and acceptable, on the grounds that cultural issues are a prime determinant of circumcision norms. But naming the boy’s home village, for example, would be inappropriate. The photographs should be strictly “documentary” in nature, recording only such events as would have happened anyway’ (Circlist 2014: Online). CIRCLIST then states that ‘When travelling, beware of laws of your own country that have extra-territorial application. The old saying “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” is no longer a reliable legal defence’ (Circlist 2014: Online). The quantity of photographic information begs the question of whether CIRCLIST is interested in circumcision photos from an educational perspective or whether an illicit motivation underpins this project.

⁷⁵ Anthropologist Eric Kline Silverman lists the various groups in his book *From Abraham to America: A History of Jewish Circumcision* (2006). On the circumcision advocate side, Silverman identifies five primary websites; the first on the list is CIRCLIST. Regarding the intactivist side, Silverman notes that ‘cyberspace advocates of MC [male circumcision] pale before the number and stridency of anticircumcision websites’ (Silverman 2006: 215). He then goes on to list 14 primary intactivist groups (for detailed lists and websites see Silverman 2006: 215-216). My own research experience is that number of intactivists organisations, sources, nooks, and websites is significantly greater than circumcision advocate resources. In reflecting on this, one could argue that since male circumcision is mainstream, there has been little need for pro-circumcision groups to organise officially.

⁷⁶ The full text of Sayre’s 1870 report can be found online (<http://wellcomelibrary.org/service/fulltext/b22285611/0?raw=true> Viewed 17 January 2016).

to the contraction of the hamstring tendons, as the child's doctor previously thought, and set out to examine the child's muscles. 'While passing the sponge over the upper part of the little fellow's thighs,' Sayre reports, 'the nurse cried out, "Oh, doctor! Be very careful – don't touch his pee-pee – it's very sore"' (Sayre 1870: Online). At which point Sayre found the child's penis to be

in a state of extreme erection. The body of the penis was well developed, but the glans was very small and pointed, tightly imprisoned in the contracted foreskin, and in its efforts to escape, the meatus urinarius had become as puffed out and red as in a case of severe granular urethritis; upon touching the orifice of the urethra he was slightly convulsed, and had a regular orgasm. This was repeated a number of times, and always with the same result (Sayre 1870: Online).

Sayre found that this was a chronic condition for the child: 'The nurse stated that this was his condition most of the time, and that he frequently awoke in the night crying because "his pee-pee hurt him," and the same thing had often occurred when riding in the stage or car; the friction of his clothes exciting his penis would cause erections' (Sayre 1870: Online). Sayre conducted a circumcision of the infected foreskin. The result was positive:

From the very day of the operation, the child began to improve in his general health; slept quietly at night, improved in his appetite, and, although confined to the house all the time, yet at the end of three weeks he had recovered quite a rosy color in his cheeks, and was able to extend his limbs perfectly straight while lying upon his back. From this time on he improved most rapidly, and in less than a fortnight was able to walk alone with his limbs quite straight' (Sayre 1870: Online).

This was one of the turning points for medical circumcision in the USA (Gollaher 1994; 2000; Silverman 2006: 179; Glick 2005: 158). While Sayre's five-year-old patient was recuperating, the surgeon conducted circumcision on another partially paralysed patient, a teenager this time. Again, the surgery was a success (Sayre 1870: Online; Gollaher 1994: 6). Sayre was excited by his discovery, which he published in the *Transactions of the American Medical Association*: 'I am quite satisfied from recent experience that many of the cases of irritable children, with restless sleep, and bad digestion, which is often attributed to worms, is solely due to the irritation of the nervous system caused by an adherent or constricted prepuce. Hernia and inflammation of the bladder can also be produced by the severe straining necessary to pass the water in some of these cases of contracted prepuce' (Sayre 1870). Following these events, Sayre tirelessly championed circumcision as a medical practice (Silverman 2006: 180).

This review shows that circumcision has medical roots; indeed, circumcision was introduced to the medical community as a tool to cure disease. This history has tended to normalise the practice in its health benefits, however, as we will see, this history of medicalisation is tied to the moralisation of health as it pertains to masturbation.

2. The moralisation of sexual health

The concept of health as a moral principle is deeply embedded in political and historical discourses. The poor and marginalised have always been more susceptible to disease and early death, the wealthy and privileged able to afford treatment, and retain their health; this is still relevant and applies today. Consider the following statement: 'To recognise disease in ourselves or in others is to reflect, however fleetingly, on its moral significance' (Anderson 1999: 245). Who is responsible for the disease experienced by this 'other', how did it come about, and could it have been prevented? Our perceptions of disease reflect the way we understand and see ourselves embedded in a larger system, and invoke a sense social responsibility. In other words, our perceptions of disease 'bring into focus the concerns we have about the way we live our lives, our relations to community, environment and cosmos, and they challenge us to explain the purpose of malfunction and suffering. Why me? - or why them? - and why now?' (Anderson 1999: 245). Eliminating, or at the very least controlling disease becomes a moral principle, not just to protect one's self, but to protect society at large seeing as disease 'invades individual bodies and can move between them, or else it arises unbidden within them, taking them over' (Anderson 1999: 247). In other words, we can say that being faced with disease we are also faced with the frailty of our lives and those around us, which triggers in us a 'call to action' to prevent hurt, ailment, and indeed, dis-ease.

With this in mind, we can link morality to health with the use of circumcision as a prophylactic against masturbation. Moral health arguments for circumcision are historical artifacts of the nineteenth century, the consequences of which can be discerned in the way that circumcision has been adopted as a practice in American society in particular. Masturbation was feared to promote diseases of the urinary tract, impotence, epilepsy and blindness. General consensus among medical historians is that the moralisation of circumcision and its introduction into society as a mainstream medical practice began in the nineteenth century in the Anglophone world and gained momentum during the second half of that century when attitudes toward circumcision changed from ridicule and rejection to praise and acceptance. This change was not driven by religious reasons - Christianity has, customarily, been against circumcision - but, rather by medicine. Reputable physicians became convinced that the foreskin was responsible for many diverse ailments such as childhood masturbating, syphilis, orthopaedic and neurological disorders, cancer, and insanity, to name just a few and that circumcision was a nearly miraculous treatment for nearly all these conditions. For example, the practice was heralded as an effective treatment for numerous physical and even mental ailments. In fact, circumcision was seen as a useful tool to control male sexual urges, notably

masturbation (Glick 2005: 151-152 and 172-173; Silverman 2006: 179).⁷⁷ Subsequently, male circumcision became a recommended and eventually common practice (Darby 2005).

The rise of circumcision as a treatment for masturbation was tied to existing notions about 'sexual morality,' which conceptualised masturbation as an undesirable, even malicious act, and that promoted hygiene as an important moral standard and public health concern. One of the main benefits afforded circumcision was a much-diminished tendency and desire to masturbate; this was viewed to be a positive thing because nineteenth and twentieth century medical authorities tended to regard masturbation a cause of deviant sexual behaviour, insanity, and even death (Judd 2003: 149; Neuman 1975; Gollaher 1994).

Continence was considered a virtue, and by corollary, extended to masturbation. For historian Robert Darby this process constitutes a 'demonisation of the foreskin' (Darby 2002: 7). He notes that the foreskin was seen as 'a harbour of filth,' a source of irritation, an incitement to masturbation and an obstacle to continence. Circumcision was considered a necessary corrective for these problems (Darby 2003). Ostensibly, circumcision helped 'promise to spare parents the ordeal of someday having to deal with masturbation' (Gollaher 1994: 23). By being circumcised, boys would associate their penis with pain, and thus would be reluctant to masturbate.⁷⁸ This helped to ensure their continued continence: it kept boys healthy in both the religious-spiritual and physical sense.⁷⁹

Other authors note that there was enormous potential for parental guilt should one's son contract any of the terrible afflictions that circumcision was supposed to prevent. Frank G. Lydston stated this point blatantly in his popular 1912 treatise *Sex Hygiene for the Male*: 'parents who do not have an early circumcision performed on their boys are almost criminally negligent' (quoted in Gollaher 1994: 23). Viewing masturbation as a moral ailment demanded parental responsibility for maintaining the moral and physical health of their children by working to prevent masturbation.

⁷⁷ Curbing masturbation was not simply a matter of addressing 'impure' or 'immoral' sexual urges. Many were also convinced that masturbation was dangerous, and could cause 'severe physical debilitation and even mental deterioration to the point of insanity' (Glick 2005: 151).

⁷⁸ Here is an interesting side-note: In 1997, Laumann, Masi and Zuckerman conducted a large comprehensive analysis of data from the *National Health and Social Life Survey* (1992). The Survey collected data from 1,410 American male respondents aged between eighteen to ninety-five years. In a somewhat ironic twist, they found that masturbation rates were higher among circumcised men than their uncut peers (Laumann et al. 1997: 1053). This finding casts doubt on the Victorian-era notion that circumcision reduces the urge to masturbate. Laumann et al. also report that circumcision tends to be associated with more elaborate sexual behaviours. Boyle et al. suggest that this is possibly because 'reduced sexual sensation may impel some circumcised men to engage in more elaborate sexual practices in order to attain sexual gratification' (Boyle et al. 2002: 335).

⁷⁹ In conjunction with the rising popularity of male circumcision, some turn-of-the-century doctors in Europe and the USA used clitoridectomy as a cure for female masturbation (Rodriguez 2014; Matteoli 2011).

Coupled with a poor understanding of the biological purpose of the foreskin,⁸⁰ which was dismissed as a dangling, disposable piece of skin rather than a necessary, protective and erogenous tissue – the moralisation of sexual health contributed to a surge in circumcision rates during the nineteenth century. It would seem that the prevailing sentiment – both in poetic and practical senses – was that cleanliness was next to godliness.

Historically, hygiene and sanitation have been cited as major reasons for circumcision. Recent advocates of circumcision state that the penis sans foreskin is more hygienic because removing the foreskin reduces chances of getting smegma, the term given to the dead skin cells, dead white blood cells, and urethral and prostatic secretions that can form under the prepuce (foreskin) (Van Howe 2004).⁸¹ Smegma can also be found in up to 25 per cent of circumcised male children and can even be detected in circumcised adults (Cold and Taylor 1999: 40).⁸² According to activists, circumcision also prevents the chances of phimosis and paraphimosis⁸³ and may also prevent infections of the foreskin and glans (Cagno and Gordon 2012: e3).⁸⁴ In addition, activists note that candida infection and penile cancer are less common in circumcised men in comparison to those who still have foreskins (Morris 2007: 1151). Conversely, those who are critical of circumcision from a medical standpoint argue that ‘using the surgical treatment of circumcision to prevent phimosis is a little like preventing headaches by decapitation. It works but it is hardly a prudent form of treatment’⁸⁵ (Ritter et al. 2002: 1).

Part of the problem with discourses upholding the morality of health as it relates to circumcision is that we cannot dissociate circumcision from the member it cuts away. Circumcision is often understood to be a procedure that ‘controls’ sexuality as well as ‘treats’ health issues that are exacerbated by sexual acts. In many ways, it is possible to suggest that male sexuality was

⁸⁰ As we noted earlier, the foreskin protects the glans penis from friction and is erogenous. Despite the advancements of the fields of anatomy and biology, some physicians are still reluctant to accept that the foreskin is anatomically significant.

⁸¹ Curiously, the etymology of smegma is from the Greek *smēgma*, meaning ‘soap’, and from *smēkhein*, which means ‘cleanse’. This factoid is curious because smegma is a condition that is associated with a lack of cleanliness.

⁸² Often these same advocates of circumcision fail to acknowledge that smegma occurs in women too; yet in my research I have not come across a single pro-circumcision paper that advocates for the routine removal of the clitoral hood for hygiene purposes. This raises some curious questions about common attitudes towards female genitalia as opposed to male genitalia, but as such, they go beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁸³ Phimosis is a condition in which the opening of the foreskin is narrow and cannot be retracted; this can cause some pain and discomfort. Paraphimosis is an uncommon medical condition in which the foreskin of an uncircumcised penis becomes trapped behind the glans penis and cannot be reduced.

⁸⁴ Proper hygiene can also reduce the risk of these conditions (Cagno and Gordon 2012).

⁸⁵ Arguably one could make an analogy between routine neonatal male circumcision to prevent phimosis with routine mastectomies at puberty to prevent breast cancer in adulthood.

circumscribed through circumcision insofar as circumcision purified the male body from the vices of lust, sexual passion and drive. Here we see some overlap with arguments purporting side benefits for Jewish ritual circumcision. For example, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides affirms this stance toward circumcision as a measure to curb sexual passion.⁸⁶ In precise terms, Maimonides justifies the Jewish practice of circumcision as ‘the wish to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as possible’ (Maimonides 1963: 609). This way Jewish men, with their sexual passion diminished, would be able to focus on studying the Torah instead of being preoccupied with lustful, carnal, and even impure thoughts.

We are surely prompted to ask whether the relationship between health, hygiene and morality reinforce the ‘myth’ of circumcision as a medical imperative for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such a question is of particular relevance these days because questioning the need to circumcise is often dismissed as a challenge to global health – particularly among pro-circumcision activist views, some of whom go so far as to equate circumcision with vaccination (see for example Cooper 2010; Morris 2007; Morris et al. 2012a; Morris et al. 2012b). The comparison between circumcision and vaccination is predominantly made in the context of the fight against HIV and AIDS,⁸⁷ a matter we turn our attention to below.

3. Fear of HIV transmission

Three of the world’s most powerful health advocacy groups, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (the Global Fund) have endorsed male circumcision as an efficient measure to control HIV attributed to heterosexual contact in areas where there is high prevalence of HIV. These groups state that ‘[t]he efficacy of male circumcision in reducing female to male transmission of HIV has been proven beyond reasonable doubt. This is an important landmark in the history of HIV prevention’ (WHO and UNAIDS 2007: 2; Morris 2010: 318).

⁸⁶ Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) also known as the Rambam, was a medieval Jewish rabbi, physician and philosopher. Maimonides is considered to be one of the foremost rabbinical authorities and philosophers in Jewish history.

⁸⁷ Often conflated, perhaps because of the slash that traditionally separated them, HIV and AIDS are distinct. Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is the cause of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). Incredible medical and pharmaceutical advancements in recent years mean that (unlike when HIV was first discovered in the 1980s) those who live with HIV may no longer develop AIDS if they have access to proper medical treatment. Unfortunately in Africa, where the majority of the global HIV and AIDS pandemic is located, treatment is costly and often non-existent.

Their report went so far as to recommend that male circumcision should be recognised as an efficacious intervention for HIV (WHO and UNAIDS 2007: 3).

With the validation of the strong links between circumcision and its efficacy in curbing HIV by international peak health bodies, we can begin to see the consolidation of circumcision as a moral imperative: one must practice circumcision in order to curb a global health epidemic. Thus circumcision can be thought of as a means to secure ‘moral health’, whilst it is simultaneously hailed as a viable treatment and even a cure for numerous conditions, some of which we mentioned above. These current views bear a striking similarity to moral commitments to hygiene and infection control in nineteenth century medical discourse. Although nineteenth century discussions concentrated on the morality of masturbation and efforts to control sexual urges, today, the question of whether circumcision can be effective in reducing transmission rates of HIV occupies the moral terrain of public health debates.⁸⁸⁹ For advocates of male circumcision, the health benefits of circumcision for HIV prevention can be extended to many other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as syphilis, genital herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhoea and HPV. The physiological justification for this widening scope is twofold. Firstly, one of the functions of the foreskin is to provide a sort of sheath for the corona glans. Encased in the moist, mucous membrane of the foreskin, the glans retains a supple, moist texture. Deprived of a foreskin, the glans is exposed for the whole duration of the man’s life. This constant exposure creates friction against pants, underwear, bed sheets, other fabrics, and means that the exposed glans becomes toughened. Second, the toughened glans is more resistant to viral infections, since there is no place for the virus to enter blood circulation.

For years now researchers have conducted medical studies in various countries in Africa where the AIDS epidemic has devastated populations. There have been three research studies conducted in South Africa (Auvert et al 2005), Kenya (Bailey et al 2007) and Uganda (Gray et al 2005) that argue that circumcision is effective in curtailing HIV transmission rates.⁹⁰ Let me review these studies and

⁸⁸ This discussion also extends to more general concerns about hygiene, disease, appearance and purported dysfunction and sexual pleasure.

⁸⁹ HIV is primarily transmitted through sexual intercourse, but the virus was not discovered until the twentieth century. This shift has occurred because views have changed about the morality of masturbation.

⁹⁰ Data reported by the CDC (CDC 2010) shows that ‘individuals who are infected with STIs are at least two to five times more likely than uninfected individuals to acquire HIV infection if they are exposed to the virus through sexual contact’ (CDC 2010). STIs appear to increase susceptibility to HIV infection by two mechanisms: Genital ulcers (such as herpes or syphilis) which result in breaks in the genital tract lining or skin. These breaks create a portal of entry for HIV. Additionally, inflammation resulting from genital ulcers or non-ulcerative STIs (such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea) increases the concentration of cells in genital secretions that can serve as targets for HIV (for more information see CDC 2010). While condoms are extremely effective for preventing these, the primary concern for circumcision advocates is that people – in particular young people – may not be so inclined to use condoms.

their findings. First, Auvert et al.'s paper entitled 'Randomized, Controlled Intervention Trial of Male Circumcision for Reduction of HIV Infection Risk: The ANRS 1265 Trial' (2005) tests the hypothesis that circumcision might provide protection against HIV on the general population of the Gauteng province of South Africa. The researchers used a randomised control trial whereby a total of 3,274 uncircumcised men, aged 18–24, were randomised to a control or an intervention group with follow-up visits at months 3, 12, and 21 (Auvert et al 2005: 1112). The study found that male circumcision provides a degree of protection against the acquisition of HIV infection, and concludes that male circumcision may provide an important way of reducing the spread of HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa.

Second, in their paper 'Male Circumcision for HIV Prevention in Young Men in Kisumu, Kenya: A Randomised Controlled Trial' (2007), Bailey et al. aim to 'determine whether male circumcision had a protective effect against HIV infection, and to assess safety and changes in sexual behaviour related to this intervention' (2007: 643). The researchers conducted a randomised controlled trial of 2784 men aged 18–24 years in Kisumu, Kenya. Half the men were randomly assigned to an intervention group (circumcision), and the other half to a control group (delayed circumcision). Men who were assigned to the circumcision group were scheduled for surgery immediately once they were assigned. Those who were allocated to the control group were requested to remain uncircumcised until the end of the 24 months of study participation at which time they were offered circumcision at the study clinic (Bailey et al. 2007: 645). The researchers concluded that male circumcision substantially reduces the risk of acquiring an HIV infection (Bailey et al. 2007: 653).

The third study, 'Male Circumcision for HIV Prevention in Men in Rakai, Uganda: A Randomised Trial' (2005) by Gray et al. surveyed 4996 uncircumcised, HIV-negative men aged 15–49 years. A condition of being enrolled in this randomised trial in the rural Rakai district, Uganda was that participants agreed to HIV testing and counselling. Of the 4996 participants, 2474 were randomly assigned to receive immediate circumcision and 2522 were in the control group, for whom circumcision was delayed for 24 months (Gray et al. 2005: 657). The researchers noted a significant reduction in HIV incidence among circumcised men compared with uncircumcised control participants (Gray et al. 2005: 664).

All three trials concluded that circumcision had a protective effect with ranges from 61 per cent (Auvert et al. 2005), 60 per cent (Bailey et al. 2007), and 55 per cent (Gray et al. 2007). Each study

recommended circumcision as a proven and successful approach for HIV prevention.⁹¹

Consequently, the three trials have been instrumental in shaping the public's view of circumcision as a valid health prevention measure.⁹²

To a public that already perceives of circumcision as a valuable - if not normal - procedure, these studies can be seen as validating a common albeit recently disputed practice. If a killer pandemic such as HIV which is transmitted through blood and sexual fluids can be curbed through a relatively simple surgical procedure already practiced in many places, then we can begin to understand how circumcision would seem to alleviate the fear of HIV transmission.⁹³

⁹¹ A caveat: To delve in detail into the medical dispute about male circumcision is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is worth noting that there is significant debate regarding these studies. Critics argue that because these were three highly controlled, short-term clinical trials it is difficult to extrapolate overarching conclusions about circumcision (Bollinger et al. 2010; Denniston and Hill 2007). In question are the research methods, validity of results, lack of follow-up studies, and whether migrating the African trial results to Anglo-American settings is appropriate. Critics argue that applying these 'success stories' as blanket reasoning to encourage routine infant circumcision is misleading. Firstly there is the matter of 'informed consent': the predominant demographic for circumcision in Africa is adult males who are able to decide for themselves whether to be circumcised or not, an option that infant boys (who are the primary demographic of circumcision in Anglo-American countries) do not have. Secondly, the scientific reasoning behind circumcision and HIV transmission is disputed. Denniston and Hill (2007) argue that the rationale for excising foreskins to prevent HIV infection is based on a medical hypothesis that Langerhans cells in the foreskin are vulnerable to HIV infection. Research conducted by de Witte et al. (2007) shows the opposite to be true: Langerhans cells produce langerin, which serves as a barrier against HIV infection, thereby challenging the rationale for circumcision as a measure of HIV protection. The third argument put forward by critics of the African trials is that the efficacy of circumcision was shown to be relevant only in cases of female to male transmission of HIV through vaginal intercourse (Plank et al. 2010). Incidentally, female to male transmission of HIV is very uncommon when compared to male-to-male transmission and male-to-female transmission, which is also more effective than female-to-male (European Study Group on Heterosexual Transmission of HIV 1992). Female-to-female transmission is extremely rare (Kwaka 2003; Chan et al. 2014).

⁹² Despite the popularity of these studies for the pro-circumcision lobby, they have been vocally criticised by medical professionals and others in the field of circumcision. For example, a group called Doctors Opposing Circumcision (D.O.C) released a statement that responded to the African trials which argued that the decrease in HIV rates among the circumcised group 'may be because the circumcised males required a period of abstinence after their circumcision.' D.O.C go on to argue that '[a]ll three studies were terminated early, before the incidence of infection in circumcised males caught up with the incidence of infection in the non-circumcised males. If the studies had continued for their scheduled time, it is probable that there would have been little difference between the circumcised group and the non-circumcised group' (D.O.C 2008: Online). Further criticism comes from Mills and Siegfried (2008) who also argue that the early termination of these studies causes the benefits of circumcision to be exaggerated. Dowsett and Couch (2006) conclude that even after publication of the African randomised control trials, there is no sufficient evidence to support a program of routine circumcision to prevent HIV infection.

⁹³ Uganda adopted voluntary male circumcision as part of its comprehensive HIV prevention strategy in 2009. Cultural myths about male circumcision, sex, and HIV prevail which highlight the need for sexual education in addition to circumcision (Cohen and Trussell 1996). One of the risks of framing male circumcision as a 'surgical vaccine' is that risky behavioural patterns and cultural beliefs are ignored. This means that a community can still be at risk of HIV transmission, and even an escalated risk – since men may think that they have been 'vaccinated' for HIV which enables them to have unsafe sex with multiple partners or without a condom. Other harmful myths are: having unprotected sex after circumcision promotes wound healing; a painless post-circumcision penile erection is an indication of complete wound healing; and, as a cleansing procedure, the first post circumcision sexual encounter should be with a partner that will never come into your sexual life again. These myths are a point of

In addition to shaping the public's view of circumcision, these trials had an immense impact on shaping health policy and mainstreaming circumcision as a public health response.⁹⁴ For example, Auvert et al. came to the decisive conclusion that '[m]ale circumcision provides a degree of protection against acquiring HIV infection, equivalent to what a vaccine of high efficacy would have achieved' (Auvert et al. 2005: 1112). This is a significant claim; one that has subsequently been echoed by circumcision advocates on numerous occasions (Cooper 2010; Morris 2007; Morris et al. 2012a; Morris et al. 2012b). This claim helped to cement the status of circumcision as an essential tool in ensuring individual and public health. Indeed, Morris et al. (2012d) go as far as to argue that any public health professional who advises against infant circumcision 'risks consequences should foreskin-related medical problems, morbidity or death ensue (Morris et al. 2012d: 7). Morris et al. don't specify what these consequences might be, however they do cite a 2005 paper by paediatrician and circumcision advocate Terry Russell entitled 'Non-circumcision a legal risk'.⁹⁵ It is possible that these consequences are legal in nature. But I suggest that Morris et al. invoke the *moral obligation* that health professionals have towards their patients. For circumcision activists, circumcision is such a pivotal procedure (I have already explained that many equate it with childhood vaccines), that by advising against it, doctors and other health professionals are in breach of a moral obligation – health. Health as such is a social responsibility. Recall Durkheim for whom morals are a system of rules that constrain individual behaviour and social participation whereby individuals are under *external constraint* to conform to a moral code, and thus by performing in response to this moral obligation individuals feel as if they are fulfilling their duty towards society. This moral system is made of beliefs, values and ideas held dear by that particular society. Following Durkheim, we might see how *health* becomes a moral principle for circumcision activists such as Morris et al. (2007, 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d), Schoen (2007), and Cooper et al. (2010) in response to the fear of HIV transmission.

concern because the main goal of the strategy is to reduce the chance of HIV transmission, and yet this preventative measure leads to behaviours that greatly promote HIV transmission because it inadvertently encourages unprotected sexual intercourse for men with fresh wounds which act as a direct entry portal for the virus. The myths have even been known to encourage men who have been faithful to their partners to have multiple sexual partners – a known risk factor for HIV transmission because of the belief that they need to 'cleanse themselves' (Byabagambi 2014).

⁹⁴ The findings have been adopted by major global health organisations such as UNAIDS and WHO (see WHO and UNAIDS 2007; WHO 2009). As noted, however, these studies have been contested in the medical literature. In addition to methodological concerns about the studies, concerns have been raised about the ethics of the studies with particular reference to the political privilege of Anglo-American researchers who conduct studies on impoverished African populations.

⁹⁵ Despite persistent attempts, I have not been able to source a copy of this article. It doesn't appear on Dr Terry Russell's professional website (<http://www.circumcision.net.au/>), and the link Morris et al. (2012d) provide in their paper is broken. Other attempts to find this paper have been fruitless – there is no discernable record of it online.

4. The social responsabilisation of health

To close out this discussion of activist proponents of circumcision, we consider another aspect of the debate: the decision whether to circumcise in infancy or in adulthood. Many circumcision advocates argue that circumcision is best done at infancy: '[although it can be performed at any age, the ideal time is infancy, when adverse effects are uncommon. Considerable evidence, including data from randomised controlled trials, shows that male circumcision has no adverse effects on sexual function, sensitivity or satisfaction]' (Cooper et al. 2010: 318). Others who support circumcision argue against adult circumcision. For example, Brian Morris argues that circumcision is such a profound health imperative and should be done in infancy. In his book *In Favour of Circumcision* (1999), Morris supports his case for routine neonatal circumcision with testimonies of men who were circumcised as adults. Morris writes: 'if left until later ages, the individual has already been exposed to the risk of urinary tract infections, as well as the physical problems outlined earlier,⁹⁶ and carries a residual risk of penile cancer' (Morris 1999: 62). Morris continues 'it would take a very mature and well-informed adolescent male to make this decision for himself, and to undertake the process of ensuring that it was done. Most males in their late teens and twenties, not to mention many men of any age, are reluctant to confront such issues, even if they hold private convictions and preferences about their penis' (Morris 1999: 62).

This discussion is significant because it highlights the view of many circumcision activists like Morris that parents should exercise their social responsibility when it comes to circumcising their children because as adults, men will be unlikely choose to get circumcised. In Morris's words: 'Parental responsibility must override arguments based on the rights of the child' (1999: 62) with clear reference to the slogan promoted by anti-circumcision activists: 'his body, his choice'. For circumcision activists, the moral imperative of circumcision invokes not only the health of the child but a broader response to the public health of the community.

Intactivists

Indeed, because circumcision activists mobilise the trump card of health, and use medical studies such as the African trials, it is easy to see how circumcision was and continues to be embraced as an affordable, surgically basic tool to prevent disease and ill-health.⁹⁷ Let us now turn to consider the case put forward by opponents to circumcision. As with my discussion of activism, I will highlight the

⁹⁶ Some of the medical problems Morris outlines are: phimosis, paraphimosis, balanitis and posthitis, frenular chordee, and 'accidents' such as trapping the foreskin under the zipper (Morris 1999: 25-29).

⁹⁷ We need to remember however that circumcision's function as a preventative measure to protect the body from the potential diseases is hotly contested in the medical and bio-ethical literature

moral trump card adopted by this group, one that I term ‘autonomy’. The term *intactivism* refers to a movement of people who campaign against involuntary, nontherapeutic genital modification, such as neonatal male circumcision, female genital modification (FGM), and genital surgery on intersex children. For our purposes, we focus on their actions around neonatal male circumcision. The word ‘intactivist’ – which is a combination of the words ‘intact’ and ‘activism’ or ‘activist’ – already indicates something of the movement’s self-perception: activists who promote intact genitalia.⁹⁸ It is interesting to pause here for a minute and reflect on the use of ‘intact’ instead of ‘uncircumcised’. One reason is offered by the Circumcision Resource Center (an intactivist organisation) who claims that the term ‘uncircumcised’ affirms a cultural standard such that circumcision is implied to be the norm. This is an assumption made by a culture that practices male circumcision (Circumcision Resource Center, *Why Not Say Uncircumcised?*: online). In essence, the argument goes, the prefix ‘un’ in the term ‘uncircumcised’ suggests a lack, even though in principle, it refers to the penis with a foreskin. In a play of semantics, intactivists argue that the language of ‘uncircumcised’ frames the penis sans foreskin as the ‘whole’ member, while the member with the foreskin is lacking. Consequently, intactivists argue that the term ‘uncircumcised’ is misleading and contributes to a pro-circumcision bias. Use of the language ‘intact’ and by maintaining a distinction between ‘cut’, and ‘uncut’ are ways that intactivists attempt to return a sense of integrity and balance to the language used in the circumcision debate. But what is the origin of the ‘intactivist’ movement?

The intactivist movement is relatively new. It emerged in the United States during the 1980s and was spearheaded by a nurse named Marilyn Fayre Milos.⁹⁹ In 1979, as a nursing student, Milos (then already a mother to three circumcised boys) bore witness to her first circumcision. The infant’s screams and physical distress triggered by the procedure shook Milos to her core. She writes: ‘[t]he course of my life was changed on that day in 1979. I have now dedicated my life to bringing an end to this horrendous practice’ (Milos 1989: online). In 1985 Milos established the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resources Centers (NOCIRC) in the San Francisco Bay area.¹⁰⁰ NOCIRC was established during a decade when the USA experienced high rates of neonatal

⁹⁸ The word ‘intactivism’ is widely used in the anti-circumcision community, and is a self-attributed name. My attempts to find the origin of the word led me to the online source ‘IntactWiki’, an online dictionary for things related to the intactivist movement, which claims that the word ‘intactivism’ was coined by Richard De Seabra of the National Organization of Restoring Men (NORM) in 1995 (IntactWiki: online).

⁹⁹ On their website, Intact America (the largest American advocacy group dedicated to ending involuntary circumcision in the US) refers to Milos as the “founding mother” of the intactivist movement.

¹⁰⁰ NOCIRC was the first national clearinghouse in the United States for information about circumcision (Gollaher 2000: 163; NOCIRC *About NOCIRC*: online). The First International Symposium on Circumcision was held in 1989. There has been one held every year since.

male circumcision (Gollaher 2000: 161-164) during which the rates exceeded 60 per cent (Owings et al. 2003). Since the 1980s circumcision rates have dropped, but the intactivist movement has grown. Its growth is seemingly facilitated by the popularity of the internet as a medium to connect people from all over the world. To this end, Silverman notes that the internet has become ‘the main venue for the current debates over medical circumcision’ (Silverman 2006: 214). As such, it plays an invaluable role in the advancement of the intactivist movement insofar as it is a widespread, accessible tool for communication and information sharing (often anonymously). As one self-described ‘survivor of neonatal circumcision’ confides, ‘the Internet has been a great resource for me. All of a sudden and “out of the blue”, I realised that I was not alone in the way that I felt. I discovered that there is an international “brotherhood” of circumcised men whose life experiences have been as traumatic as my own’ (Anon 2012: Online).

It is difficult to pinpoint one specific demographic which makes up the intactivist movement, as it unites people with the shared mission of ending male neonatal genital surgery as well as other forms of non-consensual genital surgeries.¹⁰¹ In my years of research on this subject, it has become clear that intactivists come from varied backgrounds. Some are social researchers or legal academics, historians or nurses and physicians, as well as laypersons. They can be religious or secular, male or female. Some are parents who circumcised their children in infancy and subsequently regretted this decision. Some are men who – in the language of this group – are intact, while others are circumcised, and are consequently driven to put an end to the procedure they did not consent to, and continue to feel violated by.¹⁰²

For the most part, intactivists work towards changing pro-circumcision public opinion, and attempt to influence legislation. The movement is concentrated in the USA where routine neonatal male circumcision is still one of the most common medical procedures (Sorrells et al. 2007; Darby 2005; Glick 2005; Gollaher 2000; Gollaher 1994). Comparatively, in the UK and Australia routine circumcision has not been practiced since the 1950s and 1970s respectively.¹⁰³ It is possible that the

¹⁰¹ Such as FGM, and intersex genital reassignment.

¹⁰² For a selection of personal accounts of circumcision trauma see ‘Assaulted and mutilated: A personal account of circumcision trauma’ (Peterson 2001: 271-290), ‘Can you give me back my foreskin?’ (Milgrom 2012: online), ‘Despair, embarrassment, grief and survival: A personal account of the impact of infant circumcision’ (anonymous author, published online on Intactivists of Australasia website 2012).

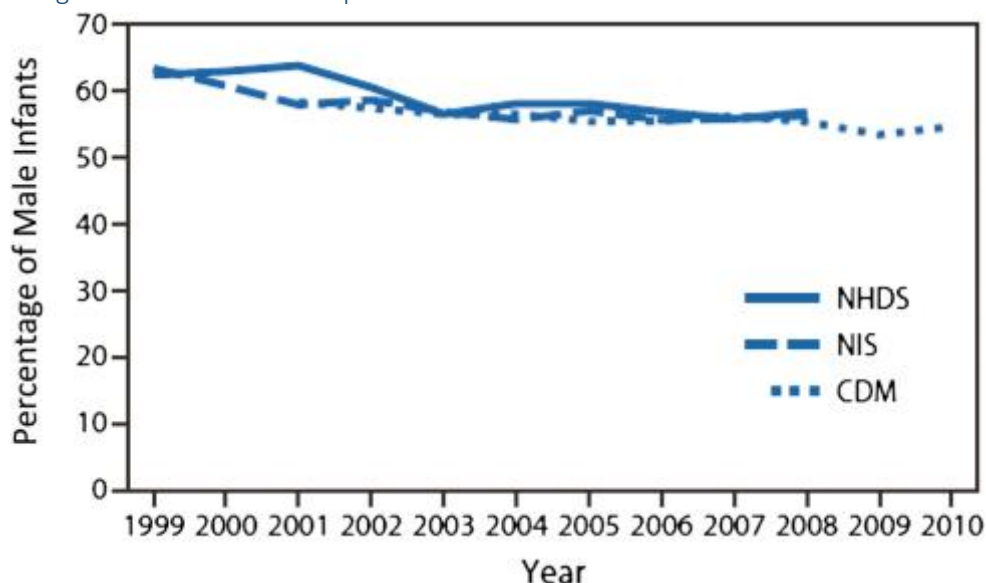
¹⁰³ The rate of circumcision among Australian infants peaked in the 1950s at over 90 per cent (Grover 2009; RACGP 2002) although the rate in New Zealand and the United Kingdom was already in decline. In Australia, the current proportion of boys who undergo circumcision, estimated from Medicare data, is about 10 per cent (Grover 2009). This decrease can be attributed to a shift in community attitudes, concerns about health risks associated with the

strength of the intactivist movement in the USA is a response to the popularity of circumcision in that country. Indeed, circumcision is the most common surgical procedure done in the USA (Cina 2013), which, as noted previously, is the only country in the world where a substantial number of its male population is routinely circumcised at birth for non-religious reasons. Statistically, more than half of newborn boys in the USA are circumcised. We can go as far as to say that circumcision is a social norm in American society, especially when compared to other countries such as Holland, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Scandinavia, Russia, China, and Japan, all of which are considered to be non-circumcising countries (Wallerstein 1985). The most current statistics on neonatal circumcision in the USA come from a recent report by the American Academy of Paediatrics' (AAP) Task Force on Circumcision conducted for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (AAP 2012). The report looked at trends in the incidence of in-hospital neonatal male circumcision and relied on independent sources of discharge data from the National Center for Health Statistics' National Hospital Discharge Survey (NHDS), the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's National Inpatient Sample (NIS), and the SDI Health's Charge Data Master (CDM), and spanned 11 years of in-hospitalisation patient data, from 1999 to 2010. This data was used to estimate the incidence of newborn male circumcision rates in the first month of life and found that the 'approximate percentage of newborn US males who were circumcised was approximately 59.1% according to the NHDS, 57.8% according to the NIS, and 55.8% according to the CDM' (AAP 2012: e758). The analysis also found a trend of decline in incidence of newborn male circumcision (see Image 4) in all three data sources: 'from 62.5% in 1999 to 56.9% in 2008 according to the NHDS; from 63.5% in 1999 to 56.3% in 2008 according to the NIS; and from 58.4% in 2001 to 54.7% in 2010 according to the CDM (AAP 2012).

It is important to note that a key limitation of this survey is that these incidence rates were derived from hospital-based surveys and do not include circumcisions conducted out of hospital, which would include most Jewish ritual circumcisions for example. This means that these data sources 'underestimate the actual rate of newborn male circumcision in the first month of life' (AAP 2012: e758).

procedure and no clear health advantages. One sign that reflects a growing concern for infant comfort was the adoption of analgesia in the 1960s for neonates undergoing the procedure.

Image 4: Incidence of in-hospital newborn male circumcision in the USA 1999–2010



Incidence of in-hospital newborn male circumcision, according to data source; United States, 1999–2010. Figure from AAP (2012).

So far, intactivists have not been successful in outlawing neonatal male circumcision in most Anglo-American countries despite the claim that ‘in most [American] states infant male circumcision fits the statutory definition for child abuse’ (Svoboda 2013: 473). In what follows, I will demonstrate the two primary arguments used by intactivists to challenge the ubiquity of circumcision: first, the violation of a person’s and bodily integrity; and second, the violation of one’s human rights to autonomy.

1. Circumcision and the violation of bodily integrity

Taking a line of argument from medical ethics, intactivists claim that routine neonatal circumcision violates a major tenant of medical care, namely: First, do no harm (Ritter and Denniston 2002). Intactivists argue that circumcision is harmful and medically unethical because it amputates healthy tissue – the foreskin – from a healthy body part, compromises the penile structure, and reduces sensitivity (Ritter and Denniston 2002; Fleiss 1997). Some intactivists argue that circumcision traumatises the male sex organ, and accordingly, qualifies as sexual abuse (LeLoo 1992; Boyle, Svoboda, Price and Turner 2000). In short, for intactivists, not only is circumcision an unnecessary surgical procedure, it violates the integrity of the male body.

The idea that circumcision violates the integrity of the physical and mental body of a person is manifest in the broad ranges of social and psychological conditions attributed to neonatal circumcision: post traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, depression, inferiority, envy of ‘intact

men,' rage, resentment, hate, fear, diminished body image, guilt, and obsession with penis size (see for example Menage 1999; Boyle et al. 2002; Bensley and Boyle 2001; Gemmell and Boyle 2001). Some men attribute their experience with sexual dysfunction, poor relationships, feelings of parental betrayal, violation, victimisation, powerlessness, distrust, shame, abuse, deformity, and alienation to their circumcision (see Reiss 2004; Peterson 2001; Anon 2012: Online; Moir 2013; Milgrom 2013). Others have likened the procedure to rape and maternal abandonment (see Goldman 1997; Anon 2013).¹⁰⁴ Some have argued that circumcision the cause of anything from high prevalence of violence and rape and perpetuates a cycle of abuse (Hill 2007) to teenage suicides (deMause 1995). As some notable intactivists have framed it: 'Circumcision may not always kill the child, but it always and intentionally kills part of the child' (Denniston, Hodges and Milos 2004: x). Furthermore, psychologist and intactivist Ronald Goldman (1997) has gone as far as raising the possibility that the trauma of neonatal circumcision can result in Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) as a form of 'infant suicide' (Goldman 1997: 172).¹⁰⁵ This is a striking claim, one that persists despite having no scientific data to support it. It is indicative of the lengths to which intactivists posit circumcision as detrimental to emotional and mental health, and why they consider it to be such a pressing moral problem.¹⁰⁶

My discussion has shown that at the core of intactivist arguments is the tension between medical literature on circumcision and notions of bodily autonomy and integrity and ethics. Recent years have seen several landmark attempts to ban neonatal and child male circumcision in the USA and places in Europe. Three notable examples are the San Francisco ballot in the USA, which called to outlaw neonatal male circumcision (2009),¹⁰⁷ the Cologne court ruling in Germany case against a

¹⁰⁴ A person whose user name has since been deleted posted the following message on the MensRights sphere of the popular website Reddit: '[w]hy don't you take a moment out of your self-absorbed, petty existence to realize the fact that circumcision is normalized in our society, the fact that babies and little boys can be cut like pigs for PURELY COSMETIC REASONS... to what avail?... to teach boys that their sexuality is evil... that their pleasure is wrought with "rape culture" and "patriarchy"?.. fuck you feminists. It doesn't matter if you're a liberal feminist. You don't talk about these issues, you ignore them, and they don't matter to you, so you are a part of the problem, you and your idiotic patriarchy theory, and your cold, emotionless, empty souls....My circumcision was my rape' (Anon *Reddit* 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Further allegations that neonatal circumcision can be the cause of infant death may be found at Carter (1979: 27), Romberg (1985: 298-99), and Denniston (1994).

¹⁰⁶ Milos and Macris (1992) go even further and argue that circumcision encodes the brain with violence.

¹⁰⁷ In 2011, a local San Francisco intactivist movement made global headlines with their attempt to ban all male circumcision in the Bay area. Armed with more than 7000 signatures, the advocacy group Prohibition of Genital Cutting of Male Minors spearheaded by activist and San Francisco resident Lloyd Schofield had enough backing to get their anti-circumcision bill on a San Francisco ballot (Bristol 2011). Had it passed, article 50 - *the Genital Cutting of Male Minors* - would have made it illegal to circumcise, cut, or mutilate the foreskin, testicles, or penis of another person under 18 (Howard 2011). The proposed bill didn't include an exemption for custom or ritual, a fact that had profound implications for the many Jews and Muslims who consider circumcision an essential part of their religious

doctor who carried out a botched circumcision on a four year-old Muslim child (2013),¹⁰⁸ and the Nordic countries' resolution to achieve a ban on non-therapeutic circumcision of male minors (2013).¹⁰⁹ What all three have in common is the underlying proposition that the circumcision of

or cultural practice. If passed, the circumcision of males who are under 18 would become a misdemeanour offence, punishable by a fine of up to USD \$1,000 or up to one year in jail. Many members of the Bay area Jewish community insisted the proposed Bill was anti-Semitic in nature, and – if passed – an infringement on their First Amendment right to religious freedom. Opponents of the ballot argued that should the bill pass, it would send Jews back into hiding, invoking a time when Jews were not free to practice their faith (Cohen 2011). As the proposed Bill didn't entail religious exemptions (Cohen 2011), any Jew - observant or non observant - who wanted to practice Jewish ritual circumcision and thus keep a seminal tenant of Jewish faith, would face grave consequences. This, opponents of the Bill argued, would effectively criminalise Jews. Indeed, Jewish organisations were among the loudest and most active opponents to the proposed ban and asserted parental choice, rights and religious freedoms in their arguments (Behrns 2013). San Franciscans never got the chance to vote on whether male circumcision should be made illegal. In July 2011, a San Francisco Superior Court Judge blocked the *Genital Cutting of Male Minors Bill*, on the grounds that only a state can regulate a medical procedure (Bristol 2011; Collier 2012).

¹⁰⁸ In May 2012 a court in Cologne, Germany, ruled on a case against a doctor who carried out a circumcision that led to medical complications on a four year-old child. The child suffered extensive bleeding and was taken to hospital (Pekárek 2013; Day 2012a). This was a traditional Muslim circumcision, done at the parents' request. The doctor was charged and tried for grievous bodily harm but acquitted on the grounds that he had parental consent (Pekárek 2013; Earp 2013). The Cologne regional court ruled that non-therapeutic or religious circumcision of male infants and children amounts to grievous bodily harm, and was a criminal offense in the area under its jurisdiction (Day 2012b). The court's judgement said that the 'fundamental right of the child to bodily integrity outweighed the fundamental rights of the parents' (quoted in The Telegraph 2012 [online]). Circumcision, the court decided, contravenes the interests of the child to decide his religious beliefs later in life. In an important caveat, the court specified that circumcision was not illegal if carried out for medical reasons, leaving the door open for potential loopholes. The Cologne court judgment was controversial and stirred up a heated debate in German politics as well as international public opinion. It drew harsh criticisms from Jewish and Muslim communities in Germany and around the world. On the one hand, the court's decision that circumcision infringed on the child's right to bodily integrity was based on secular law; and on the other, parents and guardians claimed the judgement impeded on their right to practice religion. Rather than focusing on the desired outcome of the ruling, that is: to protect the integrity of the child's body, opponents of the decision argued that it was anti-Semitic in nature, since – effectively - it singled out Jews and Muslims. The president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany condemned the decision by the Cologne court as 'an unprecedented and dramatic intrusion on the self-determination of religious communities' (quoted in Day 2012b) and called on the German parliament to pass legislation protecting circumcision as a religious practice and thus protect religious freedom against attacks (Central Council of Jews in Germany [online] 2011). Even then Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai publicly called on German Chancellor Angela Merkel to intervene against any measures that might criminalise circumcision in the country (Sharon 2012). The outcry following the Cologne court ruling forced the German parliament to respond with a resolution adopted by a large majority of MPs from all political parties, who stated their discontent with the Cologne court's verdict and declared their intention to legislate a new law allowing infant circumcision (Merkel 2013). A draft law - presented to German parliament mid-October 2012 - passed with a large majority (Day 2012a; Sharon 2012; Pekárek 2013). There are a number of interesting legislative concessions in the new German law. The first is a caveat stating that parents can consent to a non-medically essential circumcision, if it is performed 'with valid medical standards' unless – and here comes another qualifier - the child is six months or younger. In this case, a person 'designated by religious communities' (so, not necessarily a medical practitioner) may practice circumcision. Essentially, this statute allows people who are non-medics to carry out circumcisions on babies within the first 6 months after birth. This relates almost exclusively to Jewish ritual circumcisions, which is performed on newborns and is regularly done on the eighth day of the infant's life most often by a traditional Jewish circumciser who does not necessarily have medical training.

¹⁰⁹ On 24 September 2013, Sweden's Ombudsman for Children, Fredrik Malmberg, called for a ban on infant circumcision (Svoboda 2013; Local/Pvs 2013 [online]). In an editorial published in the Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* Malmberg stated that there's 'no health-related basis for circumcising male babies in those cases

children for no medical reason ought to be illegal as it infringes on the child's right to bodily integrity. Consequently, the case has been made that circumcision is a violation of the child's human right to bodily autonomy (Fox and Thomson 2009; Ungar-Sargon 2013; Svoboda and Howe 2013).

I suggest that one of the key elements fuelling the intactivist argument for bodily integrity is an understanding of autonomy – which is a central value in Western medicine and medical ethics (Varelius 2006)¹¹⁰ – as an inviolable moral principle that guides and informs ethical conduct. As one researcher argues with regards to circumcision: 'Respect for autonomy is central to medical ethics. Typically, respect for autonomy requires that medical interventions only proceed with the informed consent of the patient, at least when the patient is competent to consent. Infants lack the capacity for autonomy. They cannot give or withhold their informed consent, nor have they ever had such a capacity' (McMath 2015: 688). The link between autonomy and informed consent is interesting. Underlying this is the notion that people should have control over what happens to them. We can trace this argument back to John Stuart Mill, for whom the individual's right to independent conduct is absolute: 'Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign'. (Mill 1975: 11). Mill further argues that one's behaviour must not do harm to others. This responsibility – to the other as well as society – recognises the other's right to autonomy and self-governance. Children,

the procedure is not medically justified. [...] To circumcise a child without medical reasons and without the child's consent compromises the child's human rights, and basic medical and ethical principles' (translated to English from Swedish. Quoted in Deisher 2013). This editorial was co-signed by representatives of four leading Swedish physician organisations – the Swedish Society of Medicine, the Swedish Society of Health Professionals, the Swedish Paediatric Society, and the Swedish Association of Paediatric Surgeons (Local/Pvs 2013: [online]; National Secular Society 2013: [online]). Following the events in Sweden, on 30 September 2013, children's ombudspersons from the five Nordic countries – Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland, and the children's spokesperson from Greenland, in addition to representatives of associations of Nordic paediatricians and paediatric surgeons, met in Oslo and agreed to work with their respective national governments to achieve a ban on non-therapeutic circumcision of male minors. The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) was cited by the Swedish Ombudsman in his editorial and by the Nordic ombudspersons in their resolution, which stated: 'As ombudsmen for children and experts in children's health we consider circumcision of underage boys without a medical indication to be in conflict with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, article 12, about children's right to express their views about their own matters, and article 24, pt. 3, which says that children must be protected against traditional rituals that may be harmful to their health' (Joint statement 2013). The Council of Europe was fast to follow the footsteps of the Nordic resolution. In early October 2013, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) issued a resolution entitled Children's right to physical integrity (PACE 2013), which referred to male ritual circumcision as 'violation of the physical integrity of children.'

¹¹⁰ One would be right to pause here and ask if autonomy is really 'the only game in town', to paraphrase Earp (2013). For instance, what if an autonomous patient makes a decision that is explicitly bad for them? If we follow the 'autonomy' line of argument to its logical conclusion, we would have to concede that such a decision would have to be accepted (for a further discussion on autonomy and bioethics see Varelius 2006). A couple of ethically charged examples that come to mind are requests for voluntary amputation of a healthy limb, a consequence of *apotemnophilia* or body integrity identity disorder (BIID), also referred to as amputee identity disorder (for a discussion on the ethics of amputation see Bayne and Levy, 2005; Ryan 2008; Müller 2009; Jotkowitz and Zivotofsky 2009) or Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse to take medical treatment (for a discussion on the ethical aspects of refusal of blood transfusions by Jehovah's Witnesses see Gillon 2000; Macklin 2003; McCormick 2008; Petrini 2014).

Mill explains, must be taken care of by others; they must be protected until they reach maturity, the age of which is fixed by law. Thus liberal societies must promote and defend individual autonomy not only through social values but also through legal mechanisms. Indeed, there are legal rules requiring patient consent to medical treatments, safeguarding the patient's choice and promoting autonomy (see Grady 2015; O'Neill 2003; Macklin 2003).

2. Circumcision and the human right to autonomy

These arguments for bodily integrity are also supported by human rights ideals. In the words of prolific intactivist campaigner George Denniston 'circumcision is a violation of fundamental human rights. It violates a male's right to autonomy, to freedom of choice, to sexual health, and to bodily integrity' (1999: 234). Speaking to the subject of circumcision as a human rights violation is J. Steven Svoboda who, as Executive Director of Attorneys for the Rights of the Child, argues the following:

Circumcising an infant is an unnecessary violation of his bodily integrity as well as an ethically invalid form of medical violence. Parental proxy 'consent' for newborn circumcision is invalid. Male circumcision also violates four core human rights documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention Against Torture (CAT) (Svoboda 2013: 469).

Here Svoboda drives home the point that parental consent cannot stand in for their child's consent because doing so violates the child's 'autonomy'. Echoing Svoboda's sentiments about parental responsibility is Dena Davis, Professor of Bioethics at Lehigh University, who puts it this way: '[a]s a competent adult, I can consent to all sorts of dangerous and 'unreasonable' activities. As a parent, however, my permission derives from the presumption that I have my children's welfare at heart and am likely to know what is best for them' (Davis 2013: 457).¹¹¹ Put differently, and in my terms, the parents' decision cannot over-ride their child's right to autonomy: here, autonomy serves as a trump.

Both Davis and Svoboda highlight the concept of responsibility towards the child's autonomy and wellbeing. Svoboda's invokes human rights documents for two reasons: First, the rights outlined in them are universal and transferrable across any region, and are symbolic in nature,¹¹² and second,

¹¹¹ Davis refers here to the practice of *metzizah* which is associated with Jewish ritual circumcision and which has been the cause of a number of infants' acquisition of genital herpes, some cases resulting in severe brain damage and even death.

¹¹² Hannah Arendt argues that '[n]o paradox of contemporary politics is filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between the efforts of well-meaning idealists who stubbornly insist on regarding as "inalienable" those human rights, which are enjoyed only by citizens of the most prosperous and civilized countries, and the situation of the rightless themselves' (Arendt 1973: 279). While Arendt is speaking specifically about refugees and those who are dispossessed and 'stateless', there are nonetheless echoes of her insight in human rights more generally. In particular, one's right to a 'whole', 'intact', or 'integral' body. Think for instance of beggar children in India who are

there is no legal precedent intactivists can draw on in their calls to outlaw the procedure. Let us consider this latter point in more detail. For many intactivists, the fact that FGM is outlawed in many ‘western’ countries is often used as a point of comparison to argue, by analogy, that male circumcision should be outlawed as well.¹¹³¹¹⁴ The argument is that if female genitalia are protected from unnecessary cutting, male genitalia should be too. In ‘A Rose by Any Other Name?’ (2007) Robert Darby and J. Steven Svoboda outline a five-point scale for measuring the damage caused by male circumcision (2007: 264-265):

Type 1: A nick to or slitting of the foreskin; or premature or forcible separation of the prepuce from the glans, without amputation of tissue.

Type 2: Amputation of the portion of the foreskin extending beyond the glans.

Type 3: Amputation of the foreskin at a point partway along the glans; some foreskin and all of the frenulum left; some sliding functionality retained.

Type 4: Amputation of the foreskin at or below the corona of the glans.

Type 5: Other forms of penis mutilation, including meatotomy, subincision, infibulation, piercing and implants (Svoboda and Darby 2007: 264-265).

One can look at this scale and compare it to the scale of severities associated with FGM. The purpose of Svoboda and Darby’s scale is to homogenise male and female genital cutting in order so that they can inhabit the same ethical discourse. In their own words: ‘The main difference between FGA [female genital alteration] and MGA [male genital alteration] can now be seen to consist in the fact that the severity of FGA increases as the number of procedures rises, thus bringing more parts of the genitals under the knife, whereas the severity of MGA primarily depends on how much of a single element of the genitals is amputated’ (2007: 309). For intactivists, a fundamental sticking point is the fact that FGM is generally seen as a human rights issue while male circumcision is common practice (Svoboda and Darby 2007: 305). And for those such as Svoboda and Darby, societies should endeavour to apply universal human rights to both female and male genital alterations and not discriminate on the basis of gender (Svoboda and Darby 2007: 315).

As we have seen, the language adopted by intactivists tends to rely on notions such as ‘integrity’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘ethics’ which are also entwined with medical-legal arguments. For instance, the anti-circumcision activist and nurse Marilyn Fayre Milos states that: ‘American parents and health care professionals are faced with medical/ethical dilemmas regarding whether or not to respect the

routinely mutilated because disfigured children are more successful at eliciting money from sympathetic tourists (see Besharov 1981).

¹¹³ One paper makes the argument that ‘males are the more vulnerable and sensitive of the two genders and, therefore, deserve the greater degree of protection from traumatic, invasive, injurious, and unnecessary surgery’ (Hill 2007: 322). The author cites an article entitled ‘The fragile male’ (Kraemer 2000) as its source on the matter.

¹¹⁴ According to the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA 2015), FGM is illegal in many European countries, the USA, the UK, New Zealand and Australia (Mathews 2011).

natural integrity of the male newborn's body' (Milos and Macris 1992: 87S). This statement with its use of 'respect' and 'integrity' in addition to the idea of the body's 'natural' state implies that circumcision is disrespectful, disruptive, and unnatural. But this language is slippery because, as I want to argue, it shifts the register of debate from a medical argument to a moral one.¹¹⁵

For intactivists autonomy is also a human rights concern. We return briefly to Svoboda who explains that '[g]enital autonomy is a unified principle that children should be protected from genital cutting that is not medically necessary' (2012: 1). *Prima facie*, the intactivist argument is simple: circumcision is a violation of autonomy, and autonomy is a right and moral principle, as such circumcision is unethical. However, the debate becomes more complex when we consider the fact that circumcision is commonly practiced in religious communities. There is an evident conflict of interest here - between what parents claim is their right to religious practice, and what intactivists claim is a violation on the child's inherent right to autonomy. In his response to circumcision as a cultural and religious practice, Svoboda argues that 'genital cutting treats the child as a means to society's ends rather than an end in himself or herself' (2012: 13).

The proliferation of circumcision in tribal and religious communities frames some of the debate on circumcision and morality as a conflict between a 'western' or 'enlightened' or 'secular' canon of morality and 'barbaric' or 'religious' or 'primitive' behaviour. It is dangerously convenient to resort to an argument about cultural relativism, and indeed, this has been done before both in relation to male circumcision and FGM (for examples of critiques of cultural relativism in circumcision discourse see Wilkinson 2014; Mitchum 2013; Danial 2013). The reason I think cultural relativism is dangerously convenient is that it simply situates groups in opposition to each other, without recognising the complexity of each position. There is something quite easy with the choice to dismiss an argument relating to religio-cultural values by saying that a cultural group ought to change their cultures norms and practices, without necessarily engaging with the complexities of such practices. It is helpful here to turn to ethicist Brian D. Earp, for whom the only relevant moral framework through which we should consider the circumcision dilemma is the framework of autonomy (Earp

¹¹⁵ The distinction between registers is deliberate. Circumcision became popularised as a routine medical procedure, and so there is a sense of distrust of medical science among intactivists. This is articulated by prominent intactivists George Denniston, Fredrick Hodges and Marilyn Milos in the introduction to *Flesh and Blood: Perspectives on the Problem of Circumcision in Contemporary Society* (2004) where they write: 'We look forward to the day when our society will value *life* over a cold, calculating, and corrupt "science" that employs any pretense to divest individuals of their rights and to violate their bodily integrity' (emphasis in original, Denniston, Hodges and Milos 2004: x). Elsewhere, Denniston, Hodges and Milos suggest that medical and pharmaceutical industries rely on circumcision as an income generator, and further, 'human foreskins have now become the raw resources of the new economic epoch of biotechnology' (Denniston, Hodges and Milos 1999: vii).

2015; 2014; 2013). In his paper 'Autonomy is not the only game in town... but it is the best game in town' (2013) Earp writes:

A Jewish or Muslim child growing up in such a society is bound to experience some confusion. Does he have a right to bodily integrity or not? The "outside" world of Western norms and institutions tells him that he does. The "inside" world of his religious upbringing presents him with a different picture. And while this conflict may not cause problems for many circumcised men, for others it causes very serious problems. [...] Thus, while autonomy may not make sense in every cultural and historical context, it does make quite a bit of sense in the "multi-cultural, secular, industrialized, constitutional democracies like the ones that make up what people call the West" (Earp 2013: 6).

There's something peculiar about Earp's argument, and I've tried to put my finger on it. It is the position that 'autonomy may not make sense in every cultural context' yet it does make sense in 'multi-cultural, secular democracies' where debates about circumcision are currently taking place. Earp's argument seems to be of the nature that – since autonomy is a common principle in these 'secular democracies' – it is preferable to maintain the principle of autonomy over religio-cultural practice, which might exclude and confuse the Jewish or Muslim child in question. First, it is as if religio-cultural practice is devoid of any sense of autonomy, and to the extent that autonomy is a moral principle – empty of morality as well. Second, there is a conflict of values here, between those of the 'outside' world of Western norms represented by autonomy, and the 'inside' world of religion.

What does the argument of 'autonomy' do? First, it suggests that personal autonomy – that is, one's capacity to self-govern – trumps all other values. But is there only one way of 'doing' autonomy? What if we move away from individualism and think of the individual in relational terms? That is, as a 'self' constituted in relation to social elements? If we conceive of the 'self' as a social entity, 'autonomy' must also exist relative to social-cultural elements. With this in mind, I think it is possible to problematise the validity of 'autonomy' (as self-governance, as individualism) as an absolute moral trump in debates on circumcision.

The second concern I have with Earp's argument is that it perceives the body prior to circumcision as 'whole' and 'integral', a state that circumcision compromises. But this argument only stands if we stay committed to the notion that circumcision *fragments, reduces, takes away*, and more: that there is ever a body that is 'whole', untouched, undisturbed. Further on in this dissertation, I set out to challenge this presumption that the body is *whole* prior to circumcision. The argument that 'autonomy' trumps other values in liberal societies is curious. It is as if the religious and cultural groups that make up the multicultural societies of 'the West' (to use Earp's vocabulary) are somehow devoid of an appreciation of autonomy. A multicultural society is only thus insofar as its

social fabric is made up of a multiplicity of cultures and communities. While autonomy and individualism might be values that liberal societies are founded on, to insist on them as a trumping moral principle runs counter to the elements of ‘multiculturalism’ acknowledged by Earp. To this end, insisting on a liberal notion of autonomy as a trump card in circumcision discourse risks being somewhat reductive and exclusive.

Another expression of the autonomy argument that intactivists mobilise is to postpone the procedure until the child grows old enough to decide for himself (McMath 2015). Elsewhere, Earp writes: ‘Children of whatever [sex or] gender should not have healthy parts of their most intimate sexual organs removed, before such a time as they can understand what is at stake in such a surgery and agree to it themselves’ (Earp 2014: online). I am sympathetic to the argument that circumcision could be conducted in adulthood, however as it is a requirement in Jewish law that the infant be circumcised on his eighth day, a discussion we take up in the next chapter, the argument of postponing circumcision is not so relevant to Jewish men. And so we are left with a solution to the problem of circumcision and autonomy that effectively renders a whole cultural group as mutilators and abusers.

Conclusion

For now, let me summarise the discussion so far. Both circumcision advocates and intactivists rely on trump cards. For opponents of circumcision the trump card is ‘autonomy,’ which is directly linked to ‘agency’, while the trump card of circumcision advocates is ‘health’. In both cases however, the trump seeks to shut down debate. I want to argue that this happens because health and autonomy are moralised. By this I mean that health and autonomy are important codes or values that shape our cultural values and commitments. Morality guides our behaviour with others, and ‘autonomy’ and ‘health’ are values that intactivists and activists respectively hold dear, and consider to be important values in treating others well. In sum, the values of ‘health’ or ‘autonomy’ are only able to dominate circumcision discussions because they are morally charged.

I argue that for intactivists, circumcision cuts away at the flesh, infringing on the right of a child to a ‘whole’ or ‘uncut’ body. In contrast, circumcision activists understand the body in terms of needing circumcision as a supplement that helps curate better health for the child. Circumcision activists argue that this ‘whole’ or ‘uncut’ body compromises the child’s health, and can even produce negative effect from the perspective of infection control.

I find the intactivist argument of autonomy and bodily integrity curious, and am fascinated by this concept of an ‘integral body’, and furthermore, even more curious as to why a circumcised body cannot constitute an integral self. It seems to me that intactivist discourses around circumcision privilege a notion of the body that is potentially flawed. They reflect a privileging of the body in a so-called ‘natural’ state, prior to any ‘unnatural’ and external intervention. Intactivists rely on a notion that the body from birth is complete, whole, intact, and integral, and an external intervention such as circumcision compromises not only the child’s autonomy but also his bodily integrity. But this is the curious point: must we assume that bodies are no longer *integral* if they are modified? Is a circumcised body without integrity? Might there be another way to think of circumcision and its effect on bodies?

For now, I leave behind the discussion of circumcision by secular advocates, and turn to consider the practice of Jewish ritual circumcision. This consideration will help me to address some questions: What exactly is a whole body? In other words, what is the nature of this ‘wholeness’? Is it simply that the body one is born with is the body in its ‘whole’ state, thus any modification and change to the body subsequently cuts into, even reduces, this ‘wholeness’? What is at risk in advocating for an inherent ‘wholeness’? In one sense, it is quite evident that circumcision cuts away at the flesh, but in another, I wonder if this cut always necessitates a fragmented body. Bodies are continuously changing, always becoming, so to allude that circumcised bodies are somehow fragmented is curious indeed. Might it be possible to think of the cut of circumcision as somehow participating in the process of the body’s continuous becoming? Both intactivists and secular activists do not allow us to pose such questions because they *pathologise* circumcision and circumcised bodies. They tend to reduce circumcision to a medical procedure which does not allow us to understand circumcision as a *lived cut*.

Does Jewish ritual circumcision use autonomy or health as a moral trump? In brief, the answer is no. As we turn to Jewish ritual circumcision in the next chapter we will note how elements such as identity, religion, culture and ritual facilitate a new moral landscape, different from the ones we observed here. We explore the Bible’s reference to circumcision, and the manifestation of circumcision as a rite of passage. We will discuss the ontological nature of circumcision in Jewish culture: it is introduced in the Bible as a condition to God and Abraham’s covenant, which has implications for the Jewish people who consider themselves direct descendants of Abraham.

Chapter 3. The Genesis of Jewish Ritual Circumcision

My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant – Genesis (17: 13).

Introduction

In this chapter we turn our focus to Jewish ritual circumcision. As I previously indicated, contemporary debates on circumcision often extend their discussion to cultural and religious practices. The ritual of circumcision is particular interest to me for its unique role in Judaism: it serves as a rite of passage. In his seminal study *Rites of Passage* (1960) the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep explains that rites of passages primarily signal a transition from childhood to adulthood. The Jewish ritual of circumcision, however, takes place when the child is eight-days old. Thus we may ask: what transition does circumcision signify? What passage is being marked? We already saw that circumcision activists and intactivists use ‘health’ and ‘autonomy’ to frame their arguments, but are these the reasons that Jews circumcise? What moral value underpins the Jewish ritual of circumcision? Does looking at circumcision through Judaism enable us move away from *pathologising* circumcision and circumcised bodies, as I argued that intactivists and activists do? And if we pick up the themes of my first chapter and extend them to Jewish ritual circumcision: Do Jews conceive of circumcision as violent? Does this violence subscribe to a Manichaean structure, or is there something else at play?

The following chapters address these questions in detail. In this chapter, my first step is to consider the biblical origin of the ritual. It is difficult to untangle the Jewish practice of circumcision from the Bible as it is there, in Genesis 17, that circumcision is mentioned as a condition for a divine covenant. My purpose will be to draw links between circumcision and Jewish identity, so as to reveal the complex landscape of Jewish ritual circumcision and the potential points of contact with activist and intactivist positions. In the next section I plant the following seed: circumcision is linguistically meaningful. By this I mean that the linguistic elements of circumcision elevate the ritual from being simply a rite of passage to something much more: the linguistics of circumcision are meaningful for the *becoming* of Jewish male identity. This is a theme I take up in further detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Also in this chapter we’ll study some key components of the Jewish circumcision ritual such as the

requirement that it take place on the eighth day of his life and the aspect of naming. In conclusion, we return to consider the question of moral value as it pertains to activist and inactivist positions.

Jewish ritual circumcision and the Hebrew Bible

Our starting point is the Hebrew Bible; the Book of Genesis in particular, as it is here that circumcision is first mentioned as a condition for the divine covenant between God and Abraham. Indeed Genesis 17 is the first canonical reference to circumcision, and it is the only aetiological narrative regarding the rite in all of the Jewish Bible (Derouchie 2004: 182).

Genesis 17

Let me begin by recounting the narrative in Genesis 17. A desert-dwelling nomad, Abram was ninety-nine years old when God suddenly appeared before him and outlined a tempting offer: ‘I will make a covenant between you and Me’, God said (Genesis 17:2). God continued and promised Abram that he shall be the father of a multitude of nations (17:4) and that kings will come from him (17:6). God continued further and promised that a son be borne by Abram’s ninety-year-old wife Sarai (Genesis 17: 19).¹¹⁶ To Abram and his kin God promised an everlasting tenure of the land of Can’an (17: 8), and that: ‘I will be their God’ (17: 8). These are promises of Divine attention, fertility, and protected livelihood. ‘This is my covenant’, God says. The conditions of the covenant, however, are peculiar. In return for all his promises, God makes two requests. The first request pertains to names: God asks that Abram and Sarai change their names to Abraham and Sarah by adding the meaningful letter ‘H’ to their names.¹¹⁷ On the matter of naming, God instructs Abraham to call his future son Isaac, promising: ‘and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him’ (Genesis 17: 19). The second request pertains to the body. God commands that the newly renamed Abraham circumcise himself, and his entire male house, including his son Ishmael and his future son Isaac, and promise that every male child born from his seed would be circumcised:

And as for you, you shall keep My covenant – you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between you and Me. At the age of eight days every male among you shall be circumcised, throughout your generations – he that is born in the household or purchased

¹¹⁶ As the story is recounted in Genesis 16, Sarai was unable to get pregnant. Sarai offered Abram her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, as a mistress. Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born to him by his mistress, Hagar.

¹¹⁷ The equivalent of H in Hebrew is the letter *Hei* (ה), which in Judaism represents God’s ineffable name, the Tetragrammatons (Wolfson, 1995: 53). Remaining true to this covenantal condition, during the *Brit Milah* ceremony, the infant is named as well as circumcised.

with money from any stranger who is not of your offspring. He that is born in your household or purchased with your money shall surely be circumcised. Thus, My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. An uncircumcised male the flesh of whose foreskin shall not be circumcised - that soul shall be cut off from his people; he has invalidated My covenant (Genesis 17: 9 - 14).

The passages above serve as a clear commandment from God (Kellner 1991: 82). We can break this commandment down into two primary aspects. First is the requirement that the covenant be signed on the flesh through circumcision. Second is the condition that those who go uncircumcised be extricated. The uncircumcised male is ostracised, as he does not carry the 'tribal sign' required by God, and so can no longer take part in the covenant. He is spiritually cut off from his fellows. Effectively, those who refuse the corporeal mark consciously excise themselves from the community and forfeit their rights to benefit from the promises detailed in the covenant, namely guarantees of protection, security, and fertility. From a social perspective, parents who choose not to circumcise their infants share this burden in as much as their child will be excluded from Jewish society and the covenant.

It is well known that in group behaviour certain norms exist that must be observed to preserve social hegemony, otherwise – as Émile Durkheim argues in *The Rules of the Sociological Method* – the potential for anomie is high¹¹⁸ (Durkheim 1982: 21). The persistence of circumcision in Judaism is an example of Durkheim's argument. As Durkheim explains in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995), other than being a source of social solidarity, religion functions as a source of meaning, and reinforces the morals and social norms that are held collectively by all within a society through repetitive sacred rituals, practices and social congregation (see also in Jones 1986: 81; Thompson 1982: 129). In this context, the purpose of ritualistic circumcision as a sign of conformity used to conserve group status-quo is self evident because it serves a social marker of the Jewish community (Goldman 1998: 17). Thus circumcision is a practice that dates back to the genesis of Judaism: it was to Abraham – the first Jew – that God spoke. Thus the genesis of the first Jew commences with the first circumcision. This is the first cut: a divine intervention, from the ephemeral to the physical. We can also think of this first cut as demarcating the body of the Jewish male, simultaneously inducting him as a Jewish male, and removing him from all other non-Jewish bodies.

Historically speaking, the corporeal nature of the covenant means that those who are uncircumcised can be easily identified, and in return, they can easily be banished. This has tribal significance as

¹¹⁸ 'Anomie' here means a state of normlessness, which arises more generally from a mismatch between personal or group standards and wider social standards, or from the lack of a social ethic, which produces moral deregulation and an absence of legitimate aspirations.

David Gollaher, a historian of science and medicine, points out in his work on circumcision. Among a desert dwelling tribe with control over a certain region and access to scarce resources such as water and food, Gollaher observes that banishment no doubt amounted to a death sentence (Gollaher 2000: 10). Thus the identifying mark of circumcision satisfied two elements: first, to the community marking their infants it expressed a belief in God and his covenant. Second, it was strategically useful in distinguishing Israelite males from surrounding societies for the purpose of regulating access to resources, reproduction, and protection (Gollaher 2000: 13). Circumcision is thus an ethnic marker. It is easy to see that the fear of being spiritually, socially and physically ostracised was a continuous motivation for ritualistically excising foreskins, thereby driving the desert-dwelling descendants of Abraham to alter their genitals in the name of divine promises and social security.

Further on in the *Torah*, other commandments, rules, and obligations are handed to Abraham's kin. None involve permanent physical modifications like circumcision and few are accorded as much significance. It is worth noting here that circumcision is the first commandment that the Jewish male fulfils in his lifetime (Melamed 1993) and as such, it has profound meaning. From the early moments of infancy, the function of circumcision is *to shape*, literally as well as figuratively. Circumcision cuts at the flesh, peeling away the foreskin from the glans penis, scarring tissue, and modifying appearance. Circumcision thus literally shapes the penis, and figuratively, circumcision shapes the body as that of a Jewish male, privy to the Abrahamic covenant. One way we can thus think of circumcision is as being intrinsically linked with the creation of the Jewish male body, for it serves as a rite of passage (Forte 1995: 72). There are further resonances between circumcision and creation, and we turn to consider them next.

Great is Circumcision

Commented on at length in the *Midrash*,¹¹⁹ it is stated that '[g]reat is circumcision since but for that, the Holy One would not have created his world' (Nedarim 3-11). We could argue that it has ontological status because creation is justified through the act of circumcision. A passage from the book of Jeremiah (33:25) offers a useful statement on this: "Thus says the Lord, "If my covenant [*Brit*] is not established day and night, the laws of the heavens and earth I will not set." Hence circumcision is meaningful not only for Jewish identity, but also for the existence of the world. The significance of circumcision extends beyond this present world and to the afterlife, as according to

¹¹⁹ The *Midrash* is an extensive compilation of rabbinical interpretations of biblical stories. The compilation of essays in the *Midrash* is made principally of stories, sermons or passages that expound biblical verses rather than focusing on Jewish law and practice. By framing and filling gaps in the biblical narrative, it provides insight into the history of Judaism and Jewish thought.

the *Talmud*,¹²⁰ circumcision is a prerequisite to enter the afterlife. In one of the tractates of the *Talmud*, Rabbi Eliezar, a well-known Jewish rabbi and scholar, contends that '[h]e who makes void the Covenant of Abraham our Father has no position in the World to Come' (Avoth 3-15; also cited in Cohen 1975: 381). We see here that for the rabbis advocating for circumcision, God's warning in Genesis (17: 14) that the uncircumcised male will be cut off from his people is applicable not only for his current physical or worldly existence, but in the afterlife as well.

What I want to flag here is that it is not only the creation of the world that is justified through circumcision, as we see in the Midrashic tractate above, but also the creation of the Jewish male, in that it serves as a rite of passage into Jewish male lineage, and marks the entry of the Jewish male into the covenant between the Jewish people and God. I already noted that circumcision has a profound place in Judaism – it has been routinely practiced for centuries, and holds a lasting and meaningful role as a rite of passage. Is it possible that through circumcision *Jewishness itself* is reproduced on bodies, by bodies? This is a possibility if we allow for the association between circumcision and identity to run more than skin deep. By this I mean that the cut of circumcision is not only a physical cut, but also one that carries meaningful qualities: it has the power to cut one away from his community and his people, or equally, to tie one to his community and his people. To this extent, to keep the penis intact means to separate one's soul from Judaism. To remove the foreskin, to separate flesh from flesh, is to create a bond between the infant and his ancestors (Melamed 1993).

In *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (1996), rabbi and professor of Jewish theology Lawrence Hoffman explores the subject of circumcision and not without criticism. Hoffman (1996: 9) argues that one of the functions of circumcision is to symbolise a divide between Jew (circumcised) and non-Jew (uncircumcised), but also segregation between Jewish men and women. One of the reasons circumcision has persisted so long in Judaism and is advocated for by rabbinical leaders is, Hoffman argues, because it serves as a 'symbolic representation of the patrilineal basis for that lineage' (Hoffman 1996: 41), and consequently enforces gender dichotomy. Circumcision thus not only demarcates Jew from non-Jew, but also male from female. In a religion

¹²⁰ The *Talmud* is the encompassing compilation of Judaism's founding legal, ethical, and religious texts, peppered with rabbinical commentaries on a vast collection of Jewish laws and traditions. Being an authority on Jewish law and custom, it is the most important post-biblical text. The *Talmud* is the basic compendium of Jewish law and thought; its tractates mainly comprise the discussions collectively known as the *Gemarah*, which elucidate the germinal statements of law collectively known as the *Mishnah*.

passed down matrilineal lineage circumcision punctuates and accentuates the male body: it requires only the participation of the male body, and concerns only the male body.

Insofar as we are discussing creation and circumcision, specifically the creation of male Jewish bodies, it is worth pausing here briefly to consider the constitution of Jewish female bodies. Recall that male infants must undergo this surgical alteration to mark them a Jew before God and Jewish society (Glick 2005: 9). What of Jewish female bodies, then?

Blood: A Gendered Dichotomy

In contrast to male bodies, the Jewish female body is not required to undergo a similar process of initiation. One reason for this is that in the view of Rabbinic Judaism,¹²¹ ‘circumcision blood was culturally mandated and drawn while menstrual blood flowed naturally and uncontrollably; men were thus seen as controlled while women were not’ (Hoffman 1996: 190). From this perspective, the woman’s body is viewed to be untameable (Hoffman 1996: 167). The contrast between the impurity and irrationality associated with female blood is intensified by the ‘pure’, cultured, and privileged male body, in particular male blood (Hoffman 1996: 167).¹²² The rules about prohibitions concerning menstruation have roots in the *Torah*, where they are detailed in Leviticus (15: 19-33). Prohibitions regarding female blood are adhered to even until this day in Orthodox Jewish communities. Here are just a few passages concerning menstruation laws:

And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be in her impurity seven days; and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even. And every thing that she lieth upon in her impurity shall be unclean; every thing also that she sitteth upon shall be unclean. And whosoever toucheth her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even¹²³ (Leviticus 15: 19-21).

We can immediately discern that menstruation is deemed impure to such an extent that it contaminates not only the menstruating woman but also anything she may touch or sit on.

Anthropologist Howard Eilberg-Schwartz confirms this orthodox interpretation of the Leviticus rules: ‘A menstruating woman is considered impure for seven days and contaminates anything upon which she sits or lies during that period. Anyone who has contact with her or with something she has contaminated must bathe in water and is considered impure until evening’ (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 178). It is important to note that it isn’t that blood is inherently good or bad. This is to say: blood

¹²¹ Rabbinic Judaism is the oldest and most mainstream form of Judaism and has most authority in Jewish culture. It was developed after the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE (Goldman 1998: 15; Hoffman 1996: 12).

¹²² Unlike circumcision blood, which is considered pure, even salvific (Hoffman 1996: 136), menstrual blood is a pollutant and impure (Hoffman 1996: 190). The female body is ‘natural’, even irrational, as implied by the uncontrolled flow of menstrual blood.

¹²³ Here ‘even’ is translated as ‘evening’ (after sundown, to be precise).

does not have *inherent qualities* that make it either positive or negative, but rather these pronouncements are determined by whether the blood belongs to a male or female. Thus blood itself is gendered: female blood is impure, while male blood isn't. While menstrual blood is considered contaminating, male blood of circumcision is considered in positive light (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 178-180): 'Women's blood is contaminating; men's blood has the power to create covenants' (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 180). Here Eilberg-Schwartz refers to the covenant of circumcision, which males enter into by the blood of their circumcision. And so circumcision serves to enjoin and separate: it separates the infant from the mother by removing him from the impure blood she shed at birth, and enjoins him into male community.

The division between male and female blood reinforces the patriarchal nature of the covenant: God had spoken to Abraham and demanded that his male house be circumcised – he did not demand this of the females. Similarly, in the story outlined in Genesis, God did not speak to Sarah (who he deemed worthy enough to carry Abraham's prodigal son Isaac), not even to give her the exciting and almost unbelievable news of her soon to be born child, which she would give birth to despite being 90 years old and erstwhile barren. The notions of impurity, irrationality, and uncontrollability that Rabbinical Judaism associates with the female body means that women have no entry into a covenant of their own with God. Women must 'depend on their father's or husband's covenant connection' (Hoffman, 1996: 167). The covenant of circumcision is so significant that it has the power to include women by proxy. In *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (2005), Shaye J. D. Cohen explains that the absence of the covenantal mark on their flesh bespeaks Jewish women's second-tier status (Cohen 2005: 111).

Until now we have limited our discussion to menstrual blood, but Leviticus extends discussion on impurity to any blood the woman sheds:

And if a woman have an issue of her blood many days not in the time of her impurity, or if she have an issue beyond the time of her impurity; all the days of the issue of her uncleanness she shall be as in the days of her impurity: she is unclean. Every bed whereon she lieth all the days of her issue shall be unto her as the bed of her impurity; and every thing whereon she sitteth shall be unclean, as the uncleanness of her impurity. And whosoever toucheth those things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even. But if she be cleansed of her issue, then she shall number to herself seven days, and after that she shall be clean (Leviticus 15: 25-28).

Not only is menstrual blood impure, but this impurity is true also of the blood the mother loses giving birth. From the time of shedding blood at birth the woman must wait for seven days until she is clean again. The ritual of circumcision, conducted eight days after birth, marks the time when the son – also contaminated with the impure blood of birth – enters male lineage, signified by the

shedding of his 'clean' and 'pure' blood during the circumcision. Anthropologist Yoram Bilu explains: 'Unlike the mother's blood, associated with sin, indecency, and death, the blood [of circumcision] signifies righteousness, wholeness, and blessing' (Bilu 2003: 181).

Therefore ritual circumcision indicates a transition from impurity (female) to purity (male) and 'constitutes a moment of male exclusiveness in which the infant is appropriated from his mother and is temporarily situated in an all-male environment' (Bilu 2003: 180). The entrance of the infant into the covenant signals his transition from the impure female blood of birthing into male blood (Eilberg-Schwartz 1997: 180). Further evidence of circumcision as a purifying factor is evident in the sense that in Judaism someone who is uncircumcised is known as *Arel*, which literally means impure. The function of circumcision is more than a social indicator to distinguish Jews from non-Jews; it has deep spiritual significance in that it 'purifies' the body. Consequently, the connotation between circumcision and purity has seeped into secular medical arguments on circumcision insofar as the foreskin is thought of as a source of infection and illness, and where cleanliness is, quite literally, close to Godliness.¹²⁴

Conventionally, and today, circumcision is 'the extension of the creation of the son by the father' (Bilu 2003: 180). This is the creation of the Jewish male body by another Jewish male: 'circumcision is a man's birth into his cultural state whereas childbirth is 'merely' a birth into the state of nature' (Hoffman 1996: 147). In this regard, the 'natural' state of the body is insufficient. It is necessary to construct the male body as a Jew in order for him to fulfil the criteria set out by the Abrahamic covenant, something that is expected of all Jewish males.

Insofar as circumcision is a rite of passage into Jewish male lineage, male converts to Judaism of any age must also abide by the law of circumcision (Hoffman 1996: 96; Forta 1995: 72). This includes converts who have been previously circumcised for medical or other reasons, as well as babies who were born without foreskin. Both are required to undergo a symbolic needle-prick on the glans in order to draw blood and fulfil the requirements of the covenant (Goldman 1998: 10). Maimonides

¹²⁴ Undoubtedly, the rabbinical reading of the impurity of female blood contrasted with the salvific, pure male blood is problematic under a feminist reading. It must be noted here that another reading of women and the covenant argues that men only are circumcised because it is only men that need circumcision (Cohen 2005: 191). This means that only men are required to sacrifice part of their sex organ to enter a covenant with God. This statement follows from Maimonides who argues that circumcision serves to reduce male lust, and is a sign of membership for those who belong to the league of the believers in the unity of God. In other words, 'Nothing in a woman's experience corresponds to circumcision because nothing in a woman's experience needs to correspond to circumcision' (Cohen 2005: 191). Women's experiences of God and Judaism differ from men, and this is marked from the very start of their lives: the absence of the cut of circumcision in their flesh signifies that they already have a relationship with God and Judaism that men do not.

argues that ‘with three things did Israel enter the covenant: circumcision, immersion and sacrifice’. Thus a gentile who wishes to convert also ‘needs circumcision, immersion and the bringing of sacrifice’ (Maimonides cited in Kellner 1991: 85). Arguably, through circumcision the body is validated, even purified. Recall that the biblical term for ‘uncircumcised’ – *Arel* – literally means ‘impure’.

Against these traditions, a non-traditionalist stream of Judaism known as Reform developed in the nineteenth century in response to Jewish Orthodoxy (traditionalist). Reform Judaism is named accordingly because it arose with an agenda of reforming Jewish identity to comply with concepts of enlightenment. The reform movement emerged with the intent of modernising Judaism. Yet even so, despite introducing new ways of thinking about Judaism and allowing mixed marriages, only two foundational Reform rabbis dared to voice dissent regarding circumcision; hence the legitimacy of the rite has remained largely intact (Goldman 1998: 5).¹²⁵ Some practices that were reformed by the reform movement are marriage and conversion, going as far as to remove some archaic prayers from the Reform prayer book. Circumcision however has ‘endured as a sign of Jewishness and Jewish identity even among Reform circles’ (Cohen 2005: 220) until this very day.¹²⁶

We have, until now, considered the biblical origin of circumcision and the importance of the ritual for Judaism. We saw a correlation between circumcision and creation: first, the creation of the world is justified through circumcision, and second, the mark of circumcision can be understood as creating Jewish men, insofar as it is a rite of passage into Jewish male lineage. With little dissent against the practice even among reform circles, circumcision has remained a cultural ritual that expresses shared, taught and learnt patterns of behaviour.

One Positive Mitzvah

In *Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Brachot and Hilchot Milah*¹²⁷ (1998), Maimonides writes: ‘It contains one positive mitzvah: to circumcise males on the eighth day’ (Maimonides 1998: 194). Circumcision

¹²⁵ These were Rabbi Holdheim and Rabbi Geiger. The latter once wrote that circumcision is a ‘barbarous bloody act’ (Goldman 1998: 13) and the former claimed circumcision was objectionable because it set Jews apart from the rest of humanity (Meyer 2003: 8).

¹²⁶ It must be noted that increasingly in Reform Judaism, the matter of circumcision has been open to scrutiny, although the official reform position is to maintain the practice of circumcision. The World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), which is the international umbrella organization of the Reform, Liberal, Progressive and Reconstructionist movements, estimates that the progressive movement has 1.8 million members worldwide (WUPJ 2016: online).

¹²⁷ The *Mishneh Torah* is Maimonides’ magnum opus, compiled between 1170 and 1180. It is an immense work containing hundreds of chapters. It was intended to be a complete statement of the Oral Law, describing all of the laws mentioned in the *Torah*. The particular chapter we are concerned with regards the laws of blessings and the laws of circumcision.

is a pivotal Jewish mitzvah. A *mitzvah* is an integral aspect of Jewish life. In a primary sense, a mitzvah refers to the precepts and commandments decreed by God and outlined in the Bible. These come with varying degrees of value or importance, as well as severity. For instance, the mitzvah of circumcision is one that commands altering infant genitalia, while another mitzvah is to regularly give to the less fortunate and commit charitable acts. To further explore the merit of circumcising, and thus the importance of circumcision in Judaism, we must first understand what a mitzvah is and what value it holds.

Mitzvah of circumcision

Literally, we can understand mitzvah (Heb. מצווה) as a commandment. It is thought that mitzvot are commanded by God, subsequently sanctioned by rabbinical leaders, and define proper Jewish conduct. That is to say, they are ritual, ethical, and practical activities that are the guidelines for a moral Jewish life. Essentially, a mitzvah is a commandment accepted and fulfilled on a complete act of faith. Their fulfilment underpins Jewish life: committing kind deeds, acting generously, procreating, and working for God are all mitzvot. According to Rabbinic tradition, there are 613 mitzvot, known as *taryag mitzvot* (Heb. תרי"ג מצוות)¹²⁸ found in the Torah (Aderet 2013).

Tradition holds that these commandments are found in the Torah that was given to Moses at Mount Sinai. This moment constitutes the creation of the Jewish peoples, after they fled Egypt and Pharaoh's staunch regime. That is, mitzvot are implicated in the very identity of the Jew. They have a biblical ontology, which was already known, spoken, and given by God to Moses, who passed it on to the Jewish people.¹²⁹

The mitzvah of circumcision has grave ramifications for those who do not practice it. Maimonides says: 'Circumcision is a positive mitzvah [whose lack of fulfilment] is punished by *karet*, as [Genesis 17:14] states: "And an uncircumcised male who does not circumcise his foreskin – this soul will be

¹²⁸ In the introduction to the first book of his exhaustive text on Jewish law *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides catalogues all of the positive mitzvot and all of the negative mitzvot, and then proceeds to divide them up into subject matter categories. There are 365 negative commandments, corresponding to the number of days in a solar year, and 248 positive commandments that correspond to the number of bones and significant organs in the human body (Drazin 2008).

¹²⁹ Judaism reveres human life. To this end, it is permitted to break any mitzvah if one's life depends on it. The sentiment here is that one should not risk their life in order to avoid transgressing a mitzvah. However, there are three areas of prohibition that may not be trespassed under any circumstances, even to save a human life. These involve murder (taking another's life), sexual misconduct (incest) and foreign worship (worshipping a deity other than God).

cut off from his people”¹³⁰ (Maimonides 1998: 196). Failure to circumcise is punishable by *karet* (Heb. קָרַח. Eng. Extirpation). This punishment concerns both body and soul. *Karet* defines a physical punishment, commonly interpreted as being a premature death at the hand of God, as well as a ‘severe spiritual punishment, the “soul’s being cut off,” and not being granted a share in the world to come’ (Rabbi Eliyahu Touger commentary in Maimonides 1998: 196-197). Curiously, circumcision and the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb are the only two positive mitzvahs for which the Torah prescribes punishment if they go unfulfilled. One salient point worth flagging here is that while these particular mitzvot involve a physical sacrifice, circumcision is particularly intriguing since it demands a *human sacrifice*: the sacrifice of the flesh of the foreskin.

At its core, a mitzvah is a deeply meaningful act bringing the Jew closer not only to God, but also to the Jewish community. It is an act of partnership and an exercise of faith. Maimonides states that the underlying purpose of sanctioning mitzvot is that Jews – by obeying them – will constantly be reminded of God and of their love of him¹³¹ (Maimonides 1998). Hence they serve as a reminder that all actions and commandments are implicated in divinity. In as much as they are not passive demands and require actions ranging from prayer, thought, dietary requirements, certain behaviour on holy days and so on, mitzvot are tangible reminders of a bond between God and the Jewish people. Circumcision is a unique mitzvah since it takes place *in the body*: it is a reflection not only of the relationship between the Jewish people and God, but also between flesh and the divine, the tangible and the intangible.

We already noted that the price for not circumcising is *karet* – a physical and spiritual extirpation. Here we can ask, who pays this price? Is it demanded from the father, who did not circumcise his son? Or is it the son himself who will suffer the judgement of *karet*? In essence, these questions wonder who is held responsible for coming under the covenant and fulfilling God’s law – the father, or the son? In a sense, these questions about parental responsibility echo the ones in contemporary debates on circumcision. This discussion on parental responsibility ties back into arguments made

¹³⁰ A positive mitzvah (commandment) is one that requires a doing action, and a negative commandment is one that details what is *not* to be done, such as the three most important negative commandments mentioned above: ‘do not kill’, ‘do not worship another deity’, and ‘do not commit incest’.

¹³¹ In similar vein, Maimonides hypothesized that circumcision served to reduce sexual pleasure and desire so that the man will focus on studying the *Torah*, and the woman will not crave his sex. He writes that the purpose of circumcision is ‘to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question’ (Maimonides 1963: 609). Maimonides goes on to argue that circumcision perfects what is defective morally, meaning any sexual urges that may distract the Jewish man from his studies. This equivalence between a lack of morality and sexual urges is not unique to Maimonides. As we saw previously, when circumcision was finally adopted as routine practice among Christians in the late nineteenth century, circumcision was lauded as a tool to prevent children from masturbating, thus curtailing their ‘impure’ sexual tendencies.

by intactivists and activists. On one side there is the intactivist position that claims that parents carry responsibility towards the integrity of their child's body and on the other are circumcision activists who advocate for an obligation towards a commitment to health. These shared dilemmas about circumcision between secular and religious positions are becoming increasingly clearer.

Expounding on the subject is Rabbi Yosef David Weisberg.¹³² Rabbi Weisberg wrote in *Otzar HaBris* (2002) that the mitzvah of circumcision is 'a positive Torah commandment [that] obligates the father to have his newborn circumcised. If he fails to do so he violates his positive commandment but the punishment of *karet* is not levied against him' (Weisberg 2002: 13). The reason that the rule of *karet*, the punishment of excision, does not fall on the father follows from the fact that when Jewish boys turn 13 they are considered men and they are thus obliged to follow the rules of the Torah. The young man can redeem his circumcision thereafter.

As a curious aside, the Torah does not define what part of the body should be circumcised. How is it known that it is the penis, then, and not the earlobe, nostril, or toe? Our answer comes from the rabbi and biblical commentator Nahmanides.¹³³ Citing Rashi,¹³⁴ Nahmanides says: 'Here [Scripture] teaches you that circumcision is done on that place of the body which is distinguishable between a male and a female' (Nahmanides commentary in Genesis 17), as God specified 'every *male* among you shall be circumcised'. Visibly, the place of difference between male and female anatomies is the genitalia. Again we see here how circumcision can be thought of as demarcating male from female, punctuating a gender divide.

Covenant of Circumcision/Word

Circumcision serves as a marker that allows for the body to be recognised as a Jewish body. But there is another important element to circumcision, and that is its linguistic meaning. In Hebrew,

¹³² Rabbi Yosef David Weisberg (1934 - 2001) performed over 100,000 circumcision ceremonies in his lifetime, and is arguably one of the most well known ritual circumcisers in the Jewish world. His contribution to this practice consists of writing *Otzar HaBris* (2002), a four-volume encyclopaedia of the laws and customs of *Brit Milah* (*Otzar* means 'treasure/s' in Hebrew, thus the book *Otzar HaBris* translates to 'the treasures of the covenant').

¹³³ Rabbi Moses ben Nahman Girondi (1194 - 1270) is known by his Hebrew acronym Ramban, as well as by the Greek-influenced formation of his name, Nahmanides. He was a leading medieval Jewish scholar, rabbi, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator. His commentary on the *Torah* is his most well known work. It frequently cites and critiques Rashi's commentary, and it usually provides alternative interpretations. His exposition, with its intermingled tales and mystical interpretations, is based upon careful philology and original study of the Bible.

¹³⁴ Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (1040 - 1105), better known by his Hebrew acronym Rashi, lived in Troyes, France. Rashi wrote wide-ranging works on Judaic legal rulings, but is most known for his expounding commentary on the Bible and *Talmud*. Rashi's textual contribution is comprehensive and covers almost the entire *Talmud*. Written as a running commentary, it explains the logical structure of each Talmudic passage and is considered indispensable to students of the *Talmud*. The exegetic method Rashi introduced in his monumental work on the *Talmud* is still applied today.

the ancient Biblical language, the ritual of circumcision is called *Brit Milah*. *Brit* means covenant and *Milah* is a homonym that means ‘word’ as well as ‘circumcision’. While the linguistic root differs, the spelling and pronunciation do not.¹³⁵ Thus *Brit Milah* can be understood as Covenant of Circumcision, or Covenant of Word. Why is this so important? What does understanding circumcision as ‘word’ offer us? Does the Jew embody this word-circumcision (*milah*) inscribed on him, and what does this then mean for our questions about the morality, indeed the violence, of this procedure? It seems important to explicate some key concepts of the Jewish ritual in order to understand the linguistic dimensions of the Jewish embodiment of circumcision.

The Jewish ritual: procedural elements

The rules and laws surrounding circumcision are plentiful. My source is the encyclopaedia titled *Otzar HaBris* by Rabbi Yosef David Weisberg (2002) which addresses the laws and customs of the Jewish ritual of circumcision *Brit Milah*. This encyclopaedia addresses questions such as ‘can circumcision be performed on the Sabbath’, as it is a Jewish holy day in which any work is strictly prohibited? (The answer to this question is 16 pages long but in brief, yes it can). What sort of utensils can be used to conduct a Jewish ritual circumcision, and how must the wound be bandaged? (The predominant custom is to use a knife. Any utensil that shuts tightly on the foreskin is forbidden – this means that modern circumcision tools such as the Gomco or Mogen clamp cannot be used to fulfil the *mitzvah* of circumcision). The pages go on and on into the minutia of the practice in a manner that illustrates just how important circumcision is, and how essential it is to get it right for Jews.

In what follows I discuss several key elements of the ritual in order to understand the meaning given to the procedural elements of circumcision such as the role of the circumciser, the timing of the procedure, and the requirement to name the infant during the ritual. First, let us consider the ritual as a whole. There is a substantial body of work outlining the rules and customs of Jewish circumcision. These range from the right time of day to circumcise the infant, appropriate compensation for the circumciser, the minimum number of attendees and their gender, considerations about what to do if the infant is ill at the time of his circumcision or is born without a foreskin, customs around *pidyon* (redeeming the first born),¹³⁶ and how to dispose of the foreskin to name but a few. To outline all the customs of ritual circumcision is an academic endeavour in its

¹³⁵ The roots *mem-vav-lamed* (מ-ו-ל) and *mem-lamed-hei* (מ-ל-ה) are the respective roots of ‘circumcision’ and ‘word’. The Hebrew noun *milah* is synonymous with both words.

¹³⁶ *Pidyon ha’ben* is the practice of redeeming the first-born son through a monetary exchange with the ritual circumciser.

own right. This said, I will focus on some key components of the *Brit Milah* ceremony. These are the day on which the child is cut, the circumciser, the cut itself, naming of the child, and the ritualistic prayer.

On the eighth day

One of the consistent elements of this ancient ceremony is that circumcision must be conducted on the eighth day of the neonate's life. This follows from the Biblical commandment:

At the age of eight days every male among you shall be circumcised, throughout your generations – he that is born in your household or purchased with money from any stranger who is not of your offspring (Genesis 17:13).

We are surely provoked to ask, why on the eighth day? Assuming that God's injunction that circumcision be performed on the eighth day is not arbitrary, scholars have rationalised this to show that circumcision on the eighth day is meaningful, insightful, and purposeful. Accepted commentary in the Talmud provides a number of interpretations. One interpretation suggests that the sacrifice should not be made until the infant has lived through the Sabbath, being the holiest day for Jews. Waiting eight days allows the infant to live through the Sabbath, as no milah or sacrifice can take place without this experience.

Alternatively, Maimonides argues that milah is conducted on the eighth day for health reasons, giving the infant a week to gain strength since he is fragile and weak. For the first week of his life, it is 'as if the child is still in the womb' (Maimonides 1998: 194), but on the eighth day he is stronger and ready to join society. In later scholarship, an argument from nature appears which qualifies its position by referring to the creation of the world in seven days (as written in Genesis). Because of these seven days of worldly creation, everything that is considered 'not nature', or in other words, that which humans contrive - is symbolised by the number eight. The argument from nature asserts that to be a complete and whole human being, 'nature' must be supplemented with 'person'. This position stems from the religious view that 'the human' is the pinnacle of God's creation, as it is said: 'So God created Man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them' (Genesis 1: 27). Let us understand this argument with respect to circumcision. Biologically, the male is born with a foreskin; this body symbolises nature, which, as the religious argument from nature goes - is not complete without human intervention. This is why circumcision takes place on the eighth day, as it is a day that is 'above nature' - it is more than seven (Ayngber 1997). It is the day when men intervene on the body, and reproduce male infants in their image by inscribing the mark of the covenant on his flesh. These men are also possibly motivated by the idea that they are acting on behalf of God, who created mankind in his image. None of these

commentaries are considered more privileged or accurate than the other. However, they all require the rite to be preformed on the eighth day. This shared commitment illustrates the degree to which Jewish scholarship considers, interprets and meditates on these commandments.

The circumciser

We see a similar pattern of textual analysis and interpretation with the rules around the ritual circumciser – the *mohel*. As you might imagine, the person initiating the child into his male lineage has an important role. But here, it is important to remember that circumcision is a mitzvah that affords great benefits. Traditionally, the obligation to circumcise is bestowed upon the father of the newborn. But this raises questions as to *who* is the beneficiary of the mitzvah, as well as who will reap its benefits. In other words, circumcision is a positive mitzvah, but is it the circumciser or the circumcised that will be rewarded the mitzvah?¹³⁷ Several commentaries discuss this matter: we consider the contrasting perspectives of the *Jerusalem Talmud* and the *Babylonian Talmud*. The first chronologically, and the first we consider here, is the *Jerusalem Talmud* (fourth century CE) (Kiddushin 1:7). The *Jerusalem Talmud* bases its interpretation on Leviticus to resolve the mitzvah quandary: ‘on the eighth day, the flesh of *his* foreskin shall be circumcised’ (Leviticus 12:3; emphasis added). This implies that the mitzvah is the privilege of the son. Since the one is unable to perform the mitzvah on his own body as a neonate, the father is charged with this responsibility over his son. Second, the *Babylonian Talmud* (sixth century CE) contends that the mitzvah is predominantly the father’s prerogative (Rabbi Touger commentary on Maimonides 1991: 196; Kiddushin 29a). Here it is argued that the mitzvah of circumcision is derived from the verse in Genesis 21 which states ‘and *Avraham* circumcised his son, Isaac’ (Genesis 21:4; emphasis added). Since it is the father Avraham (better known in English as Abraham) who is identified by name as having circumcised his son Isaac, it is the father who is awarded the mitzvah. While the *Babylonian Talmud* and the *Jerusalem Talmud* come to conflicting positions regarding who is awarded the mitzvah of circumcision (father or son), both agree that once the child is 13 years of age and enters *Bar Mitzvah* – the age of Jewish adulthood – he is responsible for himself (Rabbi Touger commentary on Maimonides 1991: 196). And as we saw above, he comes under the law of *karet* if he fails to undergo *Brit Milah*.

Importantly, Jewish law does not leave the responsibility of circumcision entirely in the hands of the father. In the event that a father refuses to circumcise his child, a *Beis Din* (Jewish rabbinical court) must see to it that the child is circumcised.¹³⁷ If there is no *Beis Din* present, the ‘obligation to

¹³⁷ A *Beis Din* is a court of Jewish law. They were common in ancient days, and still exist today in diaspora and in Israel, where they are invested with legal powers over certain religious matters such as those relating to marriage

circumcise the infant falls on each Jew residing on the area' (Weisberg 2002: 14). This shift from an individual to a community obligation is important – it operates as a social expectation, demand or injunction rather than an individual desire. If one expresses individual desire here, one breaks with Judaism and breaks with community. If we return back to the debate between activists and intactivists presented in the last chapter, there is a fundamental difference in the logic of Jewish circumcision and the logics presented by the activists and intactivists. Jewish ritual circumcision is seen as a communal concern, while activists and intactivists view circumcision in terms of the individual. Ostensibly, the circumcision of a Jewish child is not left to chance. These measures are in place to ensure the continuation of the ritual.

Circumcision is also a surgical procedure. Therefore, while the father is obligated to have his son circumcised, it is widely accepted that an individual who is professionally trained and skilled in circumcision performs the cutting to reduce any chance of surgical error. The circumciser is known traditionally as the *mohel*.¹³⁸ While there is no requirement for the *mohel* to be a physician, they are trained in the procedures of circumcision. Insofar as the ritual entails ceremonious prayer as well as cutting, the *mohel* is traditionally orthodox, and undergoes appropriate medical and religious training. The act of circumcision itself proceeds in several stages, described below.

The cut

There are two stages to performing Jewish ritual circumcision. First there is *milah* (English: circumcision), which is the act of excising some or the entire foreskin. This is the original, biblical form of circumcision. Then comes *periah* (Eng. tearing). Periah is the act of tearing away the entire prepuce and exposing the glans. In periah, the circumciser splits the thin layer of mucosal membrane that is under the foreskin and rolls in downward, thus fully uncovering the head of the penis (Rubin 2003: 92).

Speculation as to the origin of periah links it to the need to more clearly distinguish Jewish men from Greek and Roman men in the Hellenistic period. With the practice of *milah* alone, it was possible for men to 'extend' or 'pull down' their remaining foreskin to make their penises look

and divorce. Israel has two legal systems: religious courts and civil courts. Jewish marriage and divorce are under the jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, a religious authority that defines a person's Jewish status strictly according to Jewish law. The Israeli Interior Ministry relies on the rabbinate's standards and interpretations in registering marriages and divorces. This is why, in Israel, all marriages need to be registered with the *Beis Din* to get their approval. When a Jewish couple is about to divorce, the divorce itself has to go through the rabbinical court.

¹³⁸ While Jewish law does not prohibit female circumcisers (In fact, Exodus 4:18-31 tells how Tzipporah, Moses's wife, circumcised her husband) it does state that it is preferable for a Jewish man to perform the *Brit Milah* if he is available.

uncircumcised.¹³⁹ Nissan argues that the practice of ‘drawing down’ the foreskin has a long history among Jews in Israel, extending from the second century B.C.E to the second century C.E (Nissan 2003: 88). The first book of Maccabees tells of Jewish ‘wicked men’ who ‘built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, in the heathen fashion, made themselves uncircumcised, renounced the holy covenant, intermingled among the heathen, and became the slaves of wrongdoing’ (1 Maccabees 1: 12-16; quoted in Nissan 2003: 89).

It is speculated that the rabbis introduced the practice of *periah* as a response to Jews hiding their circumcision (*milah*) during the Hellenistic period. The intention of the rabbis was to make appearing ‘uncircumcised’ unfeasible for Hellenising Jews (Nissan 2003: 88). The introduction of *periah* resulted in a change to the surgical procedure of circumcision and now required the radical removal of tissue and the complete uncovering of the penile glans (Nissan 2003: 88). Thus *periah* was a response to these so-called ‘wicked’ or ‘lawless’ men who were lawless insofar as they rejected the commandment of the covenant, and extended their remaining foreskin in order to assimilate into non-Jewish community. Such men were driven by the desire to immerse themselves in Hellenistic culture, which considered the circumcised penis offensive (Goldman 1998: 14; Glick 2005: 31; Cohen 1999: 48). While the origin of *periah* is speculative, it is universally accepted today that a complete and kosher circumcision must include both *milah* and *periah*.¹⁴⁰¹⁴¹

We now reach the third stage of the rite. After the infant has undergone circumcision, the mohel conducts *metzizah b’p’he* (Eng. Sucking by the mouth). This is the act of sucking the blood of circumcision with the mouth, direct from the organ. In more recent times, *metzizah* is performed through a glass tube between the infant’s member and the mouth to prevent risk of disease (Robbins 2012; Weisberg 2002), if it is performed at all. Other customs vary: some conduct *metzizah* with wine in the mouth while others gulp wine after sucking the circumcision blood and spray it on the wounded organ to promote healing (Melamed 1993; Zarkhi 2012; Weisberg 2002). According to many rabbinical decrees, *metzizah* is an integral part of the mitzvah of circumcision, and it is still widely practiced in the Orthodox community.¹⁴² There is however widespread debate about this

¹³⁹ Evidence from the contemporary foreskin restoration movement shows that the more tissue remains after circumcision, the more successful attempts to ‘restore’ an appearance of an intact foreskin are.

¹⁴⁰ For a considerate discussion on the origin of the requirement of *periah* in Judaism see Nissan (2003).

¹⁴¹ There is no evidence that biblical circumcision included *periah*. This fact renders *periah* a rabbinic addition to the biblical rule rather than the core of the mitzvah itself. Nevertheless, *periah* is seen as an integral element to the rite, as specific reference is made to it in the Talmud. In Mishna Shabbat 19:6 it is stated: ‘[If] one circumcised [*milah*] but did not uncover the corona [*periah*], it is as if he has not circumcised.’

¹⁴² The Talmudic tractate pertaining to laws relating to the Sabbath, *Mishnah Shabbat*, outlines four parts to the circumcision procedure: ‘One may do whatever is necessary for a circumcision on Shabbat. One may circumcise, and

practice. Since Talmudic times, rabbinic authorities have debated whether *metzizah* is essential to the ritual of circumcision.¹⁴³ The practice of *metzizah* is a contested topic for those within the Jewish community as well as outside of it, with opponents citing medical concerns¹⁴⁴ (see for example Hoffman 1996; Glick 2005; Judd 2003). However, homology of mouth and circumcised member is present in Jewish literature.¹⁴⁵ Historian of religion Daniel Boyarin writes that '[t]he medieval Jewish mystics speak of a "Covenant of the Mouth" and a "Covenant of the Foreskin," thus suggesting a symbolic connection between mouth and penis, between sexual and mystical experience. The homology is already implied in the Torah itself, where Moses is spoken of as "uncircumcised of the lips" (Exod. 6:30)' (Boyarin 2003: 36).¹⁴⁶ It is unclear as to why Moses referred to himself as 'uncircumcised of lips'. Earlier on in Exodus, Moses tells God that he is slow of speech, and of tongue (Exodus 4: 10). This has led rabbis to conclude that Moses had a stutter. The formulation 'uncircumcised of the lips' is open to interpretation. As Boyarin goes on to suggest, the analogy of Moses as being of 'uncircumcised of the lips' suggests to many rabbis 'an extraordinary reading of circumcision as a necessary condition for divine revelation, whether oral or visual' (Boyarin 2003: 36). It is helpful to remember Freud here, who wrote about sacrifice as achieving unity through flesh and blood, as this statement resonates deeply with circumcision.

tear [the membrane], and suck [the blood], and put a bandage and cumin on it' (Mishnah Shabbat 19: 2). After the excision of the foreskin [*milah*] and the tearing back of the tissue and the underlying mucous membrane [*periah*], the wound is sucked [*metzizah b'peh*] and then bandaged and treated with cumin. Like the bandaging of the wound and its treatment with cumin, the purpose of *metzizah* is to avert health danger and promote healing. As Elizabeth Wyner Mark points out: 'Prior to the development of antiseptics, the drawing of blood to cleanse a wound offered some benefit, and the mouth may well have been cleaner than improperly washed utensils or hands to complete the surgical procedure' (Wyner Mark 2003: xxii).

¹⁴³ Commentators have argued that the *Mishnaic* text on circumcision (cited above) categorised *metzizah* as a healing procedure, rather than an integral process of the ritual. To this end, they argued that it could be replaced with another process that involved suction: 'The Mishnah and Talmud stipulate that *metzizah* necessitated suction, but they do not explicitly set out that it is to be done orally, something interpreted as law only during the thirteenth century' (Judd 2003:148). Maimonides writes in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Milah* (2:2): 'After [*milah* and *periah*], the mohel suctions the area [*milah*] sufficiently until blood flows from places far away from the wound, in order that the child not be endangered'.

¹⁴⁴ One of the clear risks of *metzizah* is that of transferring viruses to the infant. In New York, there have been several known cases of infants contracting herpes from a mohel who conducted *metzizah* with direct mouth to penis contact. In 2003 and 2004, New York City reported three cases of Type 1 herpes that were linked to circumcision, involving a boy on Staten Island and twin boys in Brooklyn, one of whom died. The procedures were performed by a single mohel, who was later prohibited from performing the ritual in New York City (Robbins, 2012).

¹⁴⁵ For comparisons of the interpretations of symbolism and homology in Jewish mysticism see Elliot Wolfson's 'Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine' (1987).

¹⁴⁶ This description is in Exodus, when God tells Moses to demand Pharaoh free the enslaved Israelites. 'And Moses said before the Lord: 'Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh hearken unto me?' (Exodus 6: 30).

Naming

So far, I have argued that because of its deeply embedded history in Judaism, circumcision is linked with identity. But there is another element of the ritual that contributes to its identity-giving meaning: during the ritual, the infant is given his name. If we consider that '[n]ames are intimately bound up with identity - both individual and collective' (Mason 1990: 123), we must recognise that the ritual of circumcision operates not only on a scale of collective identity, but on a personal one too.

As we will go on to see, it is possible to think of 'naming' in context of circumcision in a way that is not dissimilar to the *cut* itself. Let us consider the following argument: with circumcision, Abraham sealed the divine covenant in his flesh. God requested that every generation of Abraham's progeny circumcise the flesh of their foreskins, and with this, he declared: 'My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant'. We can develop this observation further to claim that circumcision reproduces the Covenant on bodies, and so, it is in essence an inscription of the covenantal sign in the flesh of a Jewish male. By means of the continuous reproduction of the act, circumcision is able to maintain meaning not only by defining the bodies of Jews, but also by articulating itself on the flesh. Circumcision is, if you will, a reading-wound: *milah*.

As we noted above, *milah* describes the act of circumcision. It also literally translates as *word*. The double meaning of *milah* is of interest to us. In much the same way that the cut of circumcision is a symbol of the covenant, a word is also a symbol and signifier. Sociologist and literary critic Kenneth Burke once wrote that - without reverting to 'symbolism' as a label - language is a symbolic act (Burke 1989: 77-79). This implies a certain reality and attitude. Concurrently, Brit Milah is a symbolic ceremony with the purpose of inculcating the body into an archaic, meaningful Jewish vocabulary.

But *milah* is not the only significant word in a ceremony that grants a child his name. If circumcision is a *becoming-Jewish* moment, then the name satisfies a *becoming-known* moment. Known to the community, but also to oneself. Recall Derrida's words in 'the Animal': 'hearing oneself being named, receiving a name for the first time involves something like the knowledge of being mortal and even the feeling that one is dying' (2004: 389). Not only is it the cut incises the flesh, but it is also this moment of *identification* that is so violent. Becoming-known is a moment intimately linked with morality, life with death. One enters the community and has a name by which he is identified. It is the moment the community is introduced to the child, for previously his given name was spoken in secrecy only between the parents; it is now at this moment that it can be spoken out loud. We can appreciate that the purpose of this ritual, with its elements of incising and bestowing, is to provide

the infant with identifying marks of his circumcision and his naming. In a sense, too, this is the moment the child comes to know himself: with circumcision he is initiated into Jewish male lineage, and with his name he is now identified as part of the community. Recall also that God changed Abraham's name at the time of his circumcision, from Abram to Abraham (Genesis 17: 5). The correlation between cut and word, identity and circumcision, name and *milah* extends back to the Biblical narrative.

While arguably a person must grow into their name, it is nevertheless a badge we are given and seldom do we replace it. Through names we are distinguishable from our environment, classified, much like the mark of the Jew identifies his religio-cultural association. In Jewish Kabbalistic lore, it is provided that a name is one of the elementary things a parent bestows upon their child. The choice of name is considered a 'small prophecy' directed from the heavens above to the parents below and enables them to give the child the exact name that is destined for him.¹⁴⁷

There are a number of customs around naming the child. Parents should not confide in any external parties regarding the chosen name, for superstitious reasons. Once he is born, the name cannot be announced until the right moment of the ceremony.¹⁴⁸ This is done after the cutting of the foreskin, during a *kiddush* (English: Blessing) when a drop of wine is dabbed into the infant's mouth, and the following prayer is recited:

Creator of the universe. May it be Your will to regard and accept this [performance of circumcision], as if I had brought this baby before Your glorious throne. And in Your abundant mercy, through Your holy angels, give a pure and holy heart to [child's name], the son of [father's name], who was just now circumcised in honour of Your great Name. May his heart be wide open to comprehend Your holy Law, that he may learn and teach, keep and fulfil Your laws (Wolfson 1995: 77; Weisberg 2002).

This is, as I have already suggested, the infant's *becoming-known* moment: as part of a tribe, with a name, and perhaps even an identity if we are to follow Kabbalistic sentiments regarding the meaning carried in one's name. Curiously though, the patron of circumcision is Elijah. It is told that God so dearly loved the Prophet Elijah, that instead of him succumbing to a mortal death, God swept him up alive on a chariot of fire into the heavens: 'Behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire... and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven' (II Kings 2:11). His dramatic departure from worldly earth and his un-dead status makes Elijah a mythical character in Judaism. Elijah's spirit is an

¹⁴⁷ This argument is attributed to Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534 - 1572), also known by the acronym 'Ari'. The Ari is considered of the greatest Kabbalists of all times: he founded a school in Kabbalah called 'Lurianic Kabbalah', one which is the basis of almost all mystical works that followed him.

¹⁴⁸ An infant who is born immaturely, and is struggling with illness, must be given a name immediately so that the name might be used in prayer for his speedy recovery.

expected visitor during certain religious holidays, and is thought to be present at every circumcision ceremony.

And so, the patron of circumcision is a prophet who exists only in name: a non-identity if you will. As a symbolic gesture, or perhaps as an act of devoted faith, a designated chair is set-aside for Elijah. It is believed that he inhabits this seat during the ceremony. For the most part, Elijah's seat remains vacant throughout the event. Otherwise it is customary in some Jewish sects for the child's *sandek* (in English: Godfather) to sit there and cradle the baby in his arms as the circumcision takes place. There is a certain poetic irony that this ceremony orchestrated around flesh, *milah*, word, and the temporarily unnamed, would have an ethereal patron who is nothing but name.

After the *mohel's* metal instrument snips off the foreskin, he peels back the sheath of skin onto the shaft. Visually, it is as if the penis is unfolding upon itself. Circumcision is an act of (re)membering: the male member is reshaped, the mark of the covenant visible – identifying the child with his circumcision, as a precursor to the announcement of his name. Circumcision is an opening up of the threshold between spirit and flesh, God and body: 'an opening of the phallus that eventuates in the opening up – the disclosure – of the divine' (Siegumfeldt 2005: 286). As we have previously observed, it can be thought of as a reading wound. The body is connected to the divine, but in so doing, it opens up the body onto itself: the body is a text to be read.

Embodiment and circumcision

Let us return to the debate between activists and intactivists. Arguments put forward by circumcision advocates and intactivists are committed to the foreskin as a site of moral responsibility. As we saw previously, the crux for intactivists is that circumcision infringes on autonomy, and for activists of circumcision, the crux is that it is a medical imperative and a public health concern. In the case of Judaism, however, the question of circumcision as a moral responsibility sidesteps many of these terms of engagement. It must be noted that despite the common and persistent practice of circumcision among Jews, there is a debate in the Jewish community over why they practice circumcision. I seek to outline two facets of this discussion: a purely theistic argument attributing the significance of circumcision to God, and a socio-cultural tradition. I previously cautioned about making an argument based on 'cultural relativism' so, for me, it is important to remember the overriding concern of this thesis: is it possible that by thinking of circumcision through Judaism, we can *rethink how violence with respect to circumcision is conventionally understood*? Let us think back to some preferred terms mobilised by activists and intactivist, such as whole bodies, infraction,

and mutilation: both agree that circumcision is an external violation, although activists perceive it to be necessary to promote health while for intactivists the violence of circumcision reduces, compromises and fractures the integrity of the whole body.

Let us return to Ungar-Sargon's film *Cut*, and revisit the orthodox rabbi whose words we considered at the start of this thesis. In the scene, Ungar-Sargon poses the following question: 'why do Jews circumcise their boys?' to which the rabbi replies:

Look, the beginning...the first principle of circumcision is also the last principle, and that's that it is a covenant. You either believe that God said to Abraham when he was 99 years old 'circumcise yourself and all your children forever will circumcise themselves', you either believe that, or else...nothing's true.

The thrust of the rabbi's statement is that faith in God is the first and last principle of circumcision. In other words, the notion of the divine is entwined with circumcision. But I venture to argue that it is not faith in itself that drives circumcision, but rather a complex weave of socio-cultural and religious elements. To wit, we turn to the next scene in Ungar-Sargon's film, where he asks another rabbi a similar question.

This time we encounter a conservative rabbi seated in front of a bookcase, shelves laden with leather bound books.¹⁴⁹ The rabbi says:

I think that to fall into the trap of saying that we observe commandments just because God told us so sells us short as a people, but I also don't want to dismiss that completely either. I think that to a certain extent the mystery of circumcision, of Brit Milah, is really what's profound about it. That we do it because our fathers and our grandfathers and our great-great-grandfathers, going back to the first Jew, and that is quite magical and powerful.

Contrast this statement with that of the first rabbi, for whom belief in God's words is of utmost value. The second rabbi curiously says that observing commandments because 'God told us so' is something of a trap. We can interpret this statement in a couple of ways: it is possibly deceptive and misleading, and leads to a situation that we cannot get out of. It defers any agency from *person* to *God*, as it reduces motive and intent to 'God told us so'. To say that circumcision persists only because 'God told us so' closes down any discussion, and does not leave room for contemplation, debate, and thought. We ought to note that the second rabbi does not want to dismiss the importance of God himself ordering the commandment of circumcision even though he is reluctant to attribute to God the sole reason why Jews circumcise. So, why is circumcision so significant? The

¹⁴⁹ By way of clarification, Orthodox and Conservative Judaism do not necessarily share the same political and ethical commitments, with the former being more fundamental in nature.

rabbi continues and explains that what makes circumcision so profound is its mystery. But what is the mystery of circumcision? The rabbi promptly elaborates: ‘*we do it because our fathers and our grandfathers and our great-great-grandfathers, going back to the first Jew, and that is quite magical and powerful*’. For this rabbi then, the mystery of circumcision is that Jews continue to practice it, but it is also this bond: that circumcision traces across generations, linking man to his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, all the way to the first Jew. Thus the mystery of circumcision is such that it is a cut that brings together, an incision that bonds rather than separates. It is this double essence of circumcision, as a cut that doesn’t *remove* but brings together that is mysterious. And to the extent that we could think of circumcision as *milah*, as word (and what this word might be is a question explored in later chapters), we might argue that circumcision is memory inscribed in bodily absence. This binding of circumcision is what is mysterious: a force that links together generations of men in the seemingly simple act of removing a foreskin. Perhaps it is not *why* Jews still practice circumcision that is mysterious, but what is implied by it: a relationship of men extending across generations and transcending time, linking every new Jewish male body to the first. Circumcision is so powerful a practice *because* it can be traced back generations of men, all the way to Abraham – the first Jew. Why, for the rabbi, is this so mysterious? Isn’t this the precise purpose of cultural rites, as Sofsky explained – to be passed down generations, to maintain a sense of cultural and religious hegemony? There is perhaps something else at play. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Durkheim writes that ‘religion is something eminently social’ (1995: 11). To this end we can think of religious representations as collective representations, hence these religious acts, rites, and rituals constitute a collective shared reality. I make the case that for Judaism the religious is eminently social in this regard – hence what the rabbi calls the ‘mystery’ of circumcision (its on-going repetition on Jewish bodies throughout generations) can be thought of in the context of a socio-religious entanglement that constitutes Jewish identity.

There is tension between the reasons offered by both rabbis, as one attributes circumcision to the divine: ‘the first principle is the last principle, and that is the covenant’. Circumcision begins and ends with God. For the second rabbi, this matter is not so clean cut, as he shifts the emphasis from God to tradition and mystery. In a sense, these two positions represent the terms of dispute within the Jewish circumcision debate.

It is difficult to reduce Jewish ritual circumcision to medical argumentation which as we have seen is the position mobilised by intactivists and activists. You will note that neither rabbi made the case that circumcision is the healthier alternative, as activists would undoubtedly argue. Quite the opposite:

recall the orthodox rabbi's impassioned statement quoted in the introduction to this thesis, that there are no excuses for circumcising unless one is in a covenant. So, the justification cannot be based on 'health'. So we must start from the following point: the bodies of Jewish men living today are bonded with the ancient bodies of Jewish men from distant places and times, connected by the cut of circumcision - a cut that unites inasmuch as it removes. Circumcision is a matter of identity, a matter of culture and religion, which is embodied: the cut is external as much as it is internalised as it is passed on through generations. Embodiment is conceptually important here as it enables us to think of circumcision *beyond pathology*: this is in opposition to the intactivist and activist view of circumcision as a medical cut. Circumcision is beyond pathology in this context because it is not confined to medical terms, or viewed as a deviation from the 'whole body', rather it *is* body.

I would like to suggest that in Judaism circumcision is an embodied phenomenon: it is a representation of the Abrahamic covenant marked and carried in flesh, a sign of Jewish identity and a cultural heritage. The idea of the 'embodiment of religion' has been taken up elsewhere by Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling, who propose that 'religion should be understood as a social fact possessed of the potential to produce culturally sanctioned embodied orientations to self and world, characterised by a transcendent configuration of immanent social realities. This interpretation, we suggest, can be formulated into a framework which views religious life as a form of embodied pedagogics, or body pedagogics' (Mellor and Shilling 2010: 28). Thus, my discussion of Jewish ritual circumcision accords with Mellor and Shilling's proposal that religion is an embodied phenomenon (2010: 30). What Mellor and Shilling offer is a corporeally sensitive way of accessing and developing religious experiences. It helps us to see how the ritual of circumcision unites language, creation, and circumcision for Jews. As Moshe Idel, one of the leading authorities on Jewish mysticism and kabbalah, writes:

In creation and in ritual the Hebrew language was considered by Jewish mystics as playing a role much more important than the communicative one that language regularly plays. It was the main instrument of the creation of the world, and it is the vessel that is prepared by man to contain the divine light that is attracted therein in order to experience an act of union or communication (Idel 1992: 43).

Thinking of circumcision in this way, as a ritual of language and creation, we begin to see that the terms of reference that constitute Jewish circumcision differ from those mobilised by circumcision activists and intactivists. So then, how does the embodied nature of circumcision come into play when we think about the question of morality?

Let us return to the idea of the 'trump card' I introduced earlier: In recent iterations of the circumcision debate, a trump card is identified after a 'cost benefit' analysis of the various benefits

and disadvantages of the procedure. While each trump card has different motivations, at the core of each is a moral principle that they are reluctant to compromise. Earlier, I made the case that for circumcision advocates, health is the paramount moral principle, while for intactivists autonomy is most significant.

By way of comparison, I want to argue that the rationale for the Jewish moral trump differs from 'health' and 'autonomy' because the embodiment of religion implies different constraints than experienced by secular individuals. For instance, take the matter of identity – both communal and individual – in relation to the moral edicts of religious ritual. For secular circumcision activists and intactivists, the moral responsibility is based on a commitment to the child and his personal benefit. But for Judaism, the problem of moral responsibility becomes more complex as it governs not simply the individual, but the relation between parent and child, the relation between other Jews, and what some consider their responsibility to God.

I want to suggest that the ritual of Jewish circumcision substitutes the words 'mutilation', 'autonomy', and 'health', for 'creation', 'word', and 'covenant'. The ritualised dimension of circumcision endows it with meaning: it brings the child into the fold of Jewish males, ascribes an identity. This marks it as distinct from the secular versions of the debate, both of which focus on health preservation and individual autonomy. We can understand Jewish ritual circumcision in terms of its mystical relation between Jewish male, God, and community, but also as an identity-ascribing event. It is difficult to tear circumcision apart as a *singular* act. Comparatively, secular discourse on circumcision is based on liberal perceptions of autonomy on the one hand, and secular notions of health on the other. It treats each principle as an overarching value and attempts to balance the needs of the individual with the concerns of the entire population. These are resoundingly normative approaches to bodies, selfhood, and identity. They understand bodies in the normative terms of health and autonomy, as opposed to identity and meaning making. Thinking through Jewish ritual circumcision, through the meaning producing event of the ritual cut, we are able to think of bodies in more curious and possibly more productive terms.

The case of Jewish ritual circumcision is a curious one. From what perspective can we actually continue to call it violent? If we think of circumcision from the perspective of Manichaean violence, which understands violence as being an exhibition of force imposed upon or against, a violence that relies upon a division between self and other, circumcision can be thought of as a violent act. Indeed, this is the view taken by intactivists, who perceive circumcision as an act of violence imposed upon the child. Circumcision cuts away at the flesh, cutting flesh *away from* flesh, separating the

child from part of his body in an imposing and violating act. In comparison, from the perspective of circumcision activists, the violence of the procedure is justified because it is secondary to the moral value of public and personal health: parents impose circumcision upon their child because they assume that it will be of benefit in the long run. The act of separating penis glans from foreskin, and foreskin from infant, is important for reasons of health, which trump all other considerations.

But this misses the point that circumcision can also serve to unite and not only to sever. What if we took Jewish ritual circumcision as our point of departure for rethinking what violence is? What if rather than *justify* violence because it is a traditional cultural practice, we use the occasion to *rethink* violence? What implications might this have on how we conceptualise morality? To be precise, what perception of morality may enable us to rethink violence as on appearance, violence and morality are diametrically opposed?

Circumcision: a moral quandary

To answer these questions, I think it is important to understand the logic of embodiment that underpins the trump cards adopted by secular intactivists and activists. For the former, one's right to make an autonomous decision regarding the *intactness* of his body is critical, and for the latter, the body is already an implicated player in personal and public infection control. In contrast, the nature of the Jewish trump is such that it recreates the divine covenant with every circumcision: in essence, this enables us to think of the body as a point of contact, even a site of communication, between God and man. As circumcision is a socio-cultural religious marking, it is immediately implicated in understandings of selfhood and identity.

Here we might ask how intactivists and activists address the notion of 'selfhood'? From my previous discussion, it seems clear that intactivists advocate for an intact body, an agential self, undisrupted. In these terms, circumcision serves to *deprive* the circumcised man of his 'whole' being, his 'intact' self. From this perspective, the circumcised man's selfhood is compromised, fractured, incomplete. This is compounded by the fact that those who underwent circumcision as neonates were not able to make this decision for themselves, as the responsibility for deciding on circumcision falls on parents or guardians.

Comparatively, circumcision advocates do not share the sentiment that circumcision compromises one's selfhood, but rather consider it as matter of responsibility: 'Infant MC should appear on the check-list of decisions responsible parents need to make for their children' (Morris et al. 2012: 83). Circumcision is not so much a responsibility of the infant as it is for his parents or guardians.

Indeed, circumcision activists advocate for circumcision as a health imperative and attach to the body of the infant boy a moral injunction to be a healthy member of society. This is quite different in the case of Judaism, selfhood is linked with a cultural group, and at its core - with a certain notion of God. Circumcision is about a relationship: between the Jew and his forefathers, between the Jew and his community, between the community and the Jew, between the Jew and his body, his identity, and between the Jew and God.

These days many Jewish people are beginning to debate circumcision for a couple of reasons: one is because it is such a visceral procedure, and secondly perhaps because rapid information exchange means people are becoming more aware of the medical and ethical controversies surrounding the procedure. This facilitates reflection on a ritual that is so visceral and violent. Religious groups are not isolated from progress, and Judaism – a cultural group inasmuch as it is a religion – is no different. To paraphrase the words of the Conservative Rabbi quoted above: to attribute circumcision solely to divine promises is a trap. We could go as far as argue that it is simplistic.

Consider for instance the article by the Jewish philosopher Joseph Mazor: ‘The child’s interests and the case for the permissibility of male infant circumcision’ (2013). Here, Mazor responds to those who call for outlawing routine neonatal circumcision. Mazor is concerned with the popular intactivist argument that neonatal circumcision (with no pressing medical reason) is unethical as infringes on the child’s right to autonomy (see for example Svoboda 2013; Svoboda and Howe 2013; Earp 2013).¹⁵⁰ In his paper, Mazor considers the ethical problem of Jewish circumcision through a careful ‘cost-benefit’ calculation and weighs it against what I have called the secular intactivist trump of ‘autonomy’, in a process not dissimilar to the one I argue is conducted by intactivists and circumcision advocates.

Mazor (2013) writes that despite uncertainties around the medical benefits of circumcision, we must consider just how significant circumcision is in Judaism (recall my previous discussion explaining circumcision as a *mitzvah*, which is a deeply meaningful act that serves to bring the Jew closer not only to God, but also to their community. It is an act of partnership and an exercise of faith, enjoining members of the community). In light of the fundamental place circumcision occupies in

¹⁵⁰ One example of such an argument is articulated by Earp, who writes: ‘The loss of one’s foreskin can now quite easily be felt as a harm,’ it is thus ‘better to leave such an intimate decision as whether to have a part of one’s penis removed to the individual who will have to deal with the lifelong consequences’ (Earp 2013: 7). This is a typical argument for deferral: wait until the child has grown up to be an adult, so that he may make this decision for himself. But such a view considers circumcision in *isolation*, whereas in Judaism circumcision is a matter of relation, a sign of membership to community and ethnicity.

Judaism, Mazor argues it is plausible to conclude that the circumcision of babies is in fact *less* harmful than the intactivist solution of waiting until the child becomes an adult. Speaking to the matter of Jewish circumcision specifically, Mazor's argument is that people who grow up in a religious environment are likely to remain within the religious fold as they grow up. Mazor argues that most children brought up in a Jewish household will in any case choose to get circumcised when they get older, and this 'dramatically raises the expected value of the child's interest in avoiding all of the additional costs of an adult circumcision (namely, the anticipatory dread, the disruption to life, the additional risk of complications, etc.)' (Mazor 2013: 426).¹⁵¹ Mazor assumes here that most Jewish men will opt for circumcision when they get older, thus when we consider the increased risk of complications accompanied by emotional, anticipatory dread, circumcising in infancy may in fact be the more desirable solution, and may even benefit the child:

The key difference is that the [orthodox] child would most likely choose to become circumcised at adulthood if we prevented his circumcision as an infant. Circumcision thus enables the child to avoid the significant extra costs that he would most likely have to bear if he were forced to wait to have his circumcision as an adult. Moreover, doing something to a child that he would have most likely chosen to do to himself as an adult constitutes less of a frustration of his interest in self-determination. Thus, the balance of interests of the child - a balance that is admittedly quite murky and perhaps even tilted against circumcision in the secular case - seems to me to tilt significantly in favour of circumcision in the religious case' (Mazor 2013: 426-427).

Mazor makes a salient point when he argues that the majority of people in orthodox communities maintain their faith throughout their lives, hence it is extremely likely that an orthodox Jew who is not circumcised as an infant will undergo the procedure in adulthood. But this is true not only for orthodox Jews. In Israel for example, over 90 per cent of men are circumcised, while only 12 and eight per cent actually identify as being 'orthodox' and 'ultra-orthodox' respectively.¹⁵² One is surrounded by family and friends, all males have shared this experience, and the experience is one revered by the faith, either by divine provenance or by socio-cultural membership. In other words, circumcision is a practice filled with meaning. This isn't to say that it is not filled with meaning for secular people, but isn't the difference that the metric is one of 'individual' cost-benefit, as opposed to 'communal' cost-benefit?

¹⁵¹ Possible complications of adult circumcision include infection, bleeding, poor cosmetic results and a change in sensation during intercourse (Holman and Stuessi 1999).

¹⁵² According to a 2012 report from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS), the most recent report on this matter, eight per cent of Israeli Jews identify themselves as *haredim* (ultra-orthodox), 12 per cent identify as 'religious' (orthodox), 13 per cent identify as 'religious-traditionalists' (mostly adhering to Jewish law), 25 per cent identify as 'non religious traditionalists' (only partly respecting Jewish law), and 43 per cent identify as 'secular' (ICBS 2012: 3-4).

We can hypothesise as to whether circumcision rates would be so high if men were not routinely circumcised as infants, but we must then consider the curious fact that circumcision rates are just as prevalent among non-orthodox Jews as they are among orthodox ones. One point that comes to mind is that there is more to circumcision than blind faith: and this is necessary to understand its continuous, practically undisrupted reproduction on – and by – bodies over centuries.¹⁵³ Indeed, we must remember that according to Jewish law, the infant must be eight days old when undergoing his circumcision. Hence the solution of ‘postponement’ often advocated by intactivists is not inclusive of Jewish people. Observant or not, the prevalence of circumcision in Jewish communities is deeply ingrained.

In earlier chapters I argued that common conceptions of circumcision as a violent (and consequently immoral) procedure rely on a Manichaean framework. This Manichaean violence is conceptualised as an external force intervening into (or onto) an *other* wholly separated from its violator. It relies on Manichaean terms of violence and ethics. Yet what of circumcision, an act that reproduces violence on the body of every Jewish male? Circumcision is an act of violence on the body, but it is an expression of *violence of ontology*. Earlier, I implied that the nature of this violence is intrinsically linked with identity, with becoming, and with selfhood. This is a violence that is reproduced continuously on, through, and by bodies, a violence not just located in a metaphorical or historical moment in time. It is ontological because it refers to the nature of the body’s being in its becoming. In other words, I propose we think of the violence of circumcision as meaning-producing event. To understand this, we must insist on the correlation between circumcision and writing, for as Derrida reminds us, everything we come to know in the world is through language. Recall Derrida’s discussion in *The Animal* of Adam’s sin, that of denying animals of language. The act of naming the other is violent in that it *speaks for the other*, and deprives it of voice. ‘Every case of naming involves announcing a death to come . . . receiving a name for the first time involves something like the knowledge of being mortal and even the feeling that one is dying’ (Derrida 2003: 389). This

¹⁵³ Circumcision persevered even during devastating times for Jews, such as the pogroms in Europe and during the Holocaust, when practicing Judaism was banned, and the mark of circumcision could mean a death sentence. As one Holocaust survivor recounts: ‘At the morning of the German invasion to the Soviet Union, all of the children were woken up and told to escape east. I arrived with the fleeing masses to the outskirts of Minsk. The German surrounded us in an open field and ordered us to stand in a line, and then it was my turn. The German soldier who stood in front of me ordered me to put my hands up and asked: ‘Are you a Jew?’...I knew that if I told the truth, I’d be facing immediate death and I had to choose between my father who told me ‘always stay a Jew’ and my mother who told me ‘you must live’. Luckily, mother’s voice prevailed and I said: ‘No, I’m German’. And then a miracle happened - for some reason he believed me. All of the men had to pull down their pants and those found circumcised were executed, but not only did that soldier not order me to take off my clothes, he called me a ‘*Volksdeutscher*’ (an ethnic German living outside Germany)’ (Shlomo Perel interviewed in Shir 2015: online).

observation is striking given its impact on the Jewish male body who, at the time of his circumcision, is also given a name. The violence of circumcision is multiple: the physical marking on the flesh, the writing cut (milah), and the name.

While some might argue that the homonym milah is arbitrary, I will go on to show that this isn't so. In the chapters that follow, I treat milah in its dualistic meaning of circumcision and word.¹⁵⁴ In a very literal sense, Brit Milah translates to Covenant of Circumcision, or Covenant of Word. These meanings are not mutually exclusive. The combination of the 'cut' and the 'covenant' enable us to see that circumcision can be thought of as the cut that is word, the word that doubles as a cut. The rite of passage of Jewish circumcision allows us to consider a process by which a Jewish male identity is ascribed (or, in fact, inscribed) by a religiously sanctioned event.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me highlight a couple of points from this discussion that will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters. First, the very identity of the Jew is entangled with the cut of circumcision. This is true insofar as circumcision serves as a mark of identification, but also as a retracing of the Abrahamic covenant in the flesh, signing it anew. To this end, the cut of circumcision is the connecting link between the newborn Jew and every other Jewish male, all the way to the first Jew: Abraham. To this end, we might begin to recognise one of the aspects of ritual circumcision as a ritual that brings together, unites rather than separates.

In the next chapter we take up the notion of 'writing' and elaborate on its significance for rethinking circumcision through Judaism. We ask, how might we understand writing, such that it will enable us to think of circumcision as word, as text? Does Judaism already conceptualise writing in a sense that allows us to conceive of circumcision as word? And furthermore, considering that circumcision is an act of violence on the body, what does this mean for writing? Is writing necessarily violent? To respond to these questions we observe how Judaic scholarship treats 'writing', and delve deeper into the works of Jacques Derrida who espouses a novel view of writing and text.

¹⁵⁴ I am not the first to read circumcision as word. As we will see in the next chapter, Derrida wrote about circumcision as word in *Circumfession*. Kabbalistic scholar Eliot Wolfson notes a further link between circumcision and writing. In Genesis 17: 11 it is written: 'You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between us'. In the Hebrew version the word 'sign' is 'ot'. Wolfson writes: 'The rabbis thus spoke of a "letter" (a secondary meaning of the word 'ot') which served as the "seal" of the covenant of circumcision, namely, the letter *yod*' (Wolfson 1987: 191 footnote 6). The Hebrew 'ot' (אוֹת) also means signature, and mark. We can see that the language of circumcision is linked with writing.

Chapter 4. Writing and Authorship

Writing proceeds through the body – Roland Barthes (1989: 80)

Introduction

The next couple of chapters develop my discussion in order to weave a theoretical narrative around the themes of circumcision, identity, violence and morality. So far, I have argued that conventional notions of violence rely on a Manichaean framework understood as a violence that exists within oppositional binaries and consists in the exertion of force by one on another, and consequently, is destructive and oppressive. This is a conception of violence that is seen as an invasive force and in negative terms. When considered in light of circumcision, this understanding of violence manifests in a cut that wounds a body that is perceived to be intact, whole, and integral. It is not difficult to move from this observation to conceive of violence as a means of control, power, and domination. It is a force that violates, removes. So far, I have attempted to disrupt this conventional view of violence in Chapter 1 where I suggested the possibility of another way to conceive of violence, one that emerged through my discussion of Jacques Derrida's work. This is a view of violence as a generative force – one that is productive and originary rather than destructive.

In this chapter, I want to pick up the threads of this discussion to consider if we might move away from a Manichaean framework that uses stark and dualistic categories of good and bad, and towards a more nuanced view of violence with respect to circumcision? Here I remind the reader that I'm not referring to all violence or indeed all circumcision, but rather I am curious as to whether circumcision must necessarily fall on the good (circumcision activist) or bad (intactivist) spectrum. Recall that intactivists perceive circumcision to be a violent event that compromises one's bodily integrity such that the cut of circumcision reduces, even violates, and circumcision advocates perceive the procedure to be wholly good from the perspective of health and medicine and seek to preserve the legitimacy of circumcision. Let us keep these secular perspectives in mind as we turn to Judaism again to see whether we can forge a new way of conceptualising the relationship between violence and circumcision.

One crucial difference is important to note from the outset. The logics presented by intactivists and activists are concerned with the *effect* of circumcision while the logic of Judaism concerns circumcision as an originary event. As I showed previously, the ritual of circumcision is an integral practice in Judaism. The status of the procedure is in fact ontological – as the creation of the world

is justified through circumcision. To bring once again the quote from Jeremiah (33: 25): ‘Thus says the Lord, ‘If my covenant [*Brit*] is not established day and night, the laws of the heavens and earth I will not set.’ While we might understand circumcision to be violent, we must also accept that it is *originary* in this context, not only with regards to the *being* of Jewish men, but also with regards to the being of the world, that is with *creation*. For circumcision takes place on the eighth day of the infant’s life, but it also comes to signify the origins of Judaism by echoing the first cut.¹⁵⁵ And so, the procedure that once marked the making of the first Jew (Abraham) is the procedure initiates all other male Jews into Jewish male lineage and enters them into covenant with God.

The linguistic play of circumcision in Hebrew is also an important point of contrast with secular intactivist and activist positions, as the word *milah* doubles as word and circumcision. This word is a word that cuts: for if we accept that the way we understand and experience the world is mediated through language, then once we think of circumcision as an element of language, namely, as word, then quite possibly, circumcision mediates experience of the world. This perspective has ramifications for complicating intactivist and activist arguments: circumcision understood as writing enables us to see it as both a process (as a text that continues to be written on Jewish bodies) and as a state (the inerasable mark of circumcision).

My purpose in these next two chapters is to demonstrate these arguments by establishing links between circumcision and writing. Here, my aim is to show that circumcision can be thought of as writing, as text, and that this writing is also profoundly entwined with identity, while next chapter concentrates on text, creation, and choice. To do so, I use a number of theoretical tools borrowed from Jacques Derrida and Jewish Kabbalah. In what follows, I discuss Derrida’s critique of conventional notions of writing, by concentrating on *Of Grammatology* ([1967] 1997) and his deconstruction of texts written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who represents the conventional mode of conceptualising writing. My purpose is to argue that Derrida’s understanding of ‘writing in general’ allows us to argue that circumcision is a writing on the body – it is word marked on flesh. Second, we turn to Derrida’s *Circumfession* (1993) to observe closer links between writing, circumcision and violence. This discussion allows me to challenge one of the fundamental tenets of Manichaeism: the idea of an external agent (indeed author) who exercises violence. Third, I turn to consider Judaism and the question of writing; here I focus on the tradition of Jewish

¹⁵⁵ Circumcision is also the first rite of passage a male convert to Judaism is required to undertake, followed by acceptance of the Mitzvos in front of a *Beis Din* (Jewish court) and immersion in a *Mikvah* (a natural body of water or a bath that has a designated connection to natural water such as rainwater, and is used specifically for ritual immersion).

mysticism known as Kabbalah in order to see how Judaism has treated writing as a generative, creative, even ontological force, a discussion that helps me establish a connection with Derrida's conception of 'writing in general'

Derrida and the Question of Writing

It is important to note that Jacques Derrida was himself a Jew, circumcised in infancy. Derrida's lived experience of circumcision combined with his fascination with writing and text make him a meaningful theorist to develop my argument. While it is difficult to determine the full extent of the influence of Judaism on Derrida's philosophy, his conceptualisation of textuality is not foreign to what we see in Judaism.¹⁵⁶ I want to identify several resemblances between aspects of Judaic scholarly thought and Derrida's methods to suggest, along with Drob, that Derrida's thought offers an important gateway to a contemporary perspective on Kabbalistic philosophy and theology (Drob 2006: 1). That said, it is important to note that despite their structural and conceptual similarities, Derrida and Judaism remain quite independent of each other.¹⁵⁷ Derrida's methods appear to build on methods common to Judaic scholarship. In order to develop my argument that circumcision is word, one that goes beyond the allegorical, I will draw on the distinction Derrida makes between 'writing in a narrow sense' and 'writing in general'. Writing in a narrow sense means the conventional understanding of writing as letters or notations on a page and contrasts writing in general which is a form signification. In Derrida's words: 'If "writing" signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign (and that is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs' (Derrida 1997: 44). With this distinction in mind, I want to consider whether we can think of circumcision as writing in a general sense.

¹⁵⁶ Yvonne Sherwood (2006: 33) notes that there are many resonances between Derrida's work and the *midrashim*. In many texts Derrida invokes major Kabbalistic themes – albeit with Derridean twist – such as *Pardes*, *Shibboleth* and of course – circumcision.

¹⁵⁷ It wouldn't be far fetched to argue that Derrida often struggled with his Jewish heritage. In a 1984 interview with philosopher Richard Kearney, Derrida said that 'if there is a Judaic dimension to my thinking which may from time to time have spoken in or through me, this has never assumed the form of an explicit fidelity or debt to that culture' (Derrida in Kearney [1984] 2004: 139). We can interpret this statement as an attempt to mark a distance between the philosopher and the religion he was born into. This is of course also an aspect of Derrida's work – the inability to declare that I am 'this' or 'that'. In later years, however, there is a clear return to themes of Judaism and religion in his work. In *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue* (2004), Derrida says in conversation with Elisabeth Roudinesco: 'Nothing matters for me as much as my Jewishness, which, however, in so many ways, matters so little in my life' (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004: 112). Again, we see evidence of the difficult bond between Derrida and Judaism (for a discussion on this 'difficult bond' see Siegumfeldt 2013).

As a philosopher, one of Derrida's points of concern is with the problem of how philosophy can know itself. That is, how can a discourse define itself against its own terms, against its own concepts? Using the method of deconstruction, which is a form of reading whose terms of critique lie within the object under investigation, Derrida is able to challenge fundamental assumptions of philosophy.¹⁵⁸ Most pertinent here is Derrida's concern with the concept of writing, a fascination to significant in Derrida's work that the philosopher Richard Rorty goes so far as to say that Derrida 'refers to philosophy as a kind of writing' (Rorty 1978: 145). In this case, writing is not understood as inscription, as the graphic representation of something, but as a mode of coming to know the world. For Derrida then, there are necessarily two forms of writing. The first is writing *in the narrow sense*, which refers to a conventional notion of writing as an inscription that represents speech. To this extent, writing is a signifier of speech, and is thus secondary *to* speech. It is the dominant form of writing in the tradition of Western philosophy insofar as speech has always been given priority over writing. Put differently, speech is what carries *meaning*, and thus writing is simply a technology that represents this meaning on a page. Speech is always primary because this text (signifier) originates in speech (signified) and in its author.

In explicit terms, Derrida resists conventional notions of writing as secondary to speech such that the text serves as a mere signifier for speech. The speech-writing opposition that privileges speech over writing is fraught, and for Derrida, this opposition depends on writing understood as a system of literal inscriptions that are only representations of spoken words. This conventional notion of writing is based on the fact that we learn to speak before we learn to write; it would seem that speech always precedes writing. To this extent, writing is seen to perform a secondary or representational role, as it merely copies the true intent of speech.

In response to writing in the narrow sense, Derrida introduces the idea of *writing in general*. This concept is a broader, more expansive way to understand writing: it does not rely on a division between speech and writing, or the privileging of one over the other. In Derrida's telling, we are always already embedded in various systems or networks of speaking and writing: social networks, linguistic, historical, and so on. For Derrida, 'writing in general is not "image" or "figuration" of language in general, except if the nature, the logic, and the functioning of the image within the

¹⁵⁸ To this extent, Derrida's writing often consists of engagements with well-known texts by thinkers such as Lévi-Strauss, Saussure and Rousseau (*Of Grammatology* 1997), Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger (*Margins of Philosophy* 1982), Hegel (*Glas* 1986) and Freud (*Writing and Difference* 2001; *The Post Card* 1987). In these texts Derrida uses deconstruction to identify assumptions and note contradictions in these texts in order to make an argument that displaces the original meaning of the text by using the methods and arguments that the thinker in question has adopted.

system from which one wishes to exclude it be reconsidered. Writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true' (Derrida 1997: 43). Any signifier points to a signified, and what is signified is in turn another signifier to a signified. Hence meaning isn't located in one signified since that signified itself is a signifier of another signified. The consequence is that there is no stable halting point in language.¹⁵⁹ Rorty puts this observation nicely: 'For Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more - just as history does not lead to Absolute Knowledge or the Final Struggle, but to more history, and more, and still more' (Rorty 1978: 145). For Derrida, the sense of writing does not assume finality or a closing down because writing, or 'text' refers to the definitive character of any actuality: 'What I call "text" implies all the structures called "real," "economic," "historical," "socio-institutional," in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that "there is nothing outside the text"' (Derrida 1988: 148). Further on, I elaborate on Derrida's claim.

Given that Derrida enables us to think of 'text' in a way that is not restricted to words on a page, I want to suggest that it is possible to think of circumcision as word, and of the procedure as a form of writing. This makes it possible to think of circumcision - *milah* - not in an allegorical sense, but as word written on body. One consequence is that it allows us to understand circumcision in a way that produces meaning, and as a procedure that is legible, one that demands reading and interpretation.

Given that Derrida's body of work is genuinely extensive,¹⁶⁰ I focus on a number of key sources: *Circumfession* (1993) and *Of Grammatology* ([1967] 1997), the latter being one of Derrida's earlier works, its publication preceding *Writing and Difference* ([1967] 2001) and *Speech and Phenomena*

¹⁵⁹ Here is an example. Consider for a moment the written sign. The written sign is *empty* of both the writer and referent: it is merely a signifier. Thus there is an implied *absence* in writing. Derrida argues that it is the very non-presence associated with writing that enables the conditions of possibility *of all signs*, written or not. The very thing that ostensibly undermines writing, absence, is constitutive of writing, and thus of meaning. To conceptualise this statement simply observe closely the writing on this page. What is it that makes this writing possible? On first glance, we might answer 'letters', however upon closer inspection we see that spacing between letters makes it possible for words to form, the spacing between words make it possible for sentences to form, the spacing between sentences make it possible for paragraphs to form, and so on. If you take a close look you will see that the spacing is not empty – it is *generative*, and full of possibility. To explain the concept of differing and deferring we can think of a specific word, 'cat'. For 'cat' to be recognised as a sign, *c*, *a*, and *t* all must follow each other, must follow the spaces that condition the possibility for *c a t* to be recognised, and they must also be different from one another. But 'cat' can only be recognised as it is different from other words, and so on. There is no stable halting point in language.

¹⁶⁰ Derrida's contributions are so substantial that the contents of his archives at the University of California Irvine circa 1946 - 2000, span 59.4 linear feet, or 150 boxes and 15 oversized folders (Online Archive of California 2014: online). Bruno Clément, former director of the Collège International de Philosophie (CIPh) which was co-founded by Derrida in 1983, has suggested that the CIPh must also be included in Derrida's oeuvre (Nishiyama 2009).

([1967] 1973), all published in 1967 only months apart.¹⁶¹ I will focus on *Of Grammatology* in order to demonstrate how Derrida challenges conventional notions of writing, that is - *writing in a narrow sense*.

Writing in General

In general terms, Derrida's argument in *Of Grammatology* is a response to structuralism.¹⁶² Broadly defined, structuralism holds that all human activity and its products, such as thought, perception, and knowledge, are constructed and are thus not natural. The language of structuralism is applied to those systems of thought that maintain that meaning derives from the language system in which we operate. Structuralism is closely related to Semiotics, which is the study of signs, symbols and communication, and concerns the way that meaning is constructed and understood. Thematically, structuralism maintains a commitment to the division between the constructed and the natural. Derrida is critical of this division insofar as it bears a similarity to the distinction between speech and writing: it is an artificial distinction, one that privileges one mode over another.

In the opening pages to *Of Grammatology*, Derrida articulates his project as a work that responds to *logocentrism*, a concept he defines as the privileging of speech over writing. He argues that logocentrism controls the concept of writing.¹⁶³ The fact that speech precedes writing seemingly

¹⁶¹ It is worth noting here that despite being separate books, Derrida intended for *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology* to be read as complementary works. In *Derrida: A Biography* (2013), Derrida's meticulous biographer Benoît Peeters notes that when it became clear that the publication of *Of Grammatology* would be delayed, Derrida wondered whether it might be possible to delay the publication of *Writing and Difference* so that the two works would not be separated. 'He was anxious about them seeming too fragmented if published apart' notes Peeters, as 'the various references from one volume to the other might fall flat' (Peeters 2013: 172). Elsewhere, in *Positions* (1982) Derrida says: 'we can take *Of Grammatology* as a long essay articulated in two parts (whose conjuncture is not empirical, but theoretical, systematic) into the middle of which one could staple *Writing and Difference*. [...] Inversely, one could insert *Of Grammatology* into the middle of *Writing and Difference*...' (Derrida 1982: 4). Indeed, many of the essays contained in each of the books are referential, with both texts serving as the foundation for Derrida's argument that writing is neither secondary to speech, nor a derivative form of language. One example of conversation between *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference* is the term 'The End of the Book (and the beginning of writing)' that Derrida uses in both books. This phrase is the title of Derrida's introduction to *Of Grammatology*, and is a main theme in the final essay of *Writing and Difference*. In that sense, the narrative of these books is cyclical, with the beginning of one referring to the ending of the other, and vice versa.

¹⁶² The 1950s and 1960s, the years in which Derrida embarked on his academic pursuits, were a significant time for French philosophy. The preceding decades were concerned with studies of phenomenology, which is the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, and existentialism, which considered the nature of the human condition as a key philosophical problem. In this academic climate, structuralism and poststructuralism began to gain influence. Heidegger is recognised as being one of primary influences on the structuralist movement which came at the time of the 'Linguistic Turn' in French academia characterised by a return to Saussure's work. The underpinning suggestion was that revisiting Saussure's theory of the sign could offer philosophy the possibility of escaping the eternal dichotomy of subject and object.

¹⁶³ This is Derrida's intervention into a western philosophical tradition that privileges voice over writing, such that voice occupies the site of immediacy, of a full and pure presence qua comprehension, as *logos*. Speech is said to

mirrors the historical evolution of speech as something that appears before writing. But for Derrida this is not just a matter of language – it is a question of origin and the evolution of communication. As we will see, the question of origin resonates with a Kabbalistic approach to writing. For Derrida, the question is not whether speech came first and then writing, but rather the problem is that writing and speech have been understood in terms of an opposition to one another, an opposition that privileges speech over writing. In Derrida's words: 'The critique of logocentrism is above all the search for the other and the other of language' (Derrida interviewed in Kearney 2004: 154). By deconstructing texts that contain this opposition, Derrida argues that the relationship between signified and signifier is not in fact a neutral coupling, but rather privileges the speaking voice over the written artefact.

At this point I want to give my discussion more specificity and consider the fourth chapter in *Of Grammatology*, entitled 'From/Of the Supplement to the Source: The Theory of Writing' ('the Supplement'). Indeed, in light of my desire to argue that circumcision is a form of writing, 'the Supplement' offers a useful ground for me to develop my argument. Derrida's conceptualisation of writing in 'the Supplement' emerges from his close reading and critique of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* ([1781] 1986). Despite Rousseau's interest in – and study of – language, he never finished or published a complete theory of writing. For Derrida, the question of why Rousseau omitted a theory of writing in his thesis on the origin of language is of interest. Derrida concentrates on a couple of chapters from Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (the *Essay*), specifically the sections 'Of Writing' and 'Whether It Is Likely That Homer Knew How To Write'. In what follows I conduct a brief exposition of Rousseau's argument combined with Derrida's deconstruction of Rousseau's argument.

The Supplement

Rousseau's primary concern in the *Essay* is with clarifying the conditions and distinctions that allowed for the progression of language and which motivated people to speak. Conventionally understood, Rousseau's argument espouses geographical and cultural distinctions as key drivers in the development of language: 'Speech differentiates man from the other animals; language differentiates one nation from another; where a man is from is known only once he has spoken. [...] since speech is the first social institution, it owes its form to natural causes alone' (Rousseau 1986: 240). For Rousseau, geography is pivotal in shaping the way language forms, and speech serves as an

directly signify thought, with written words merely signifying of speech. Writing is thus relegated to an instrumental and secondary function.

indicator of where the speaker is from.¹⁶⁴ Speech is composed of sound, articulations, and utterances, the various combinations of these - Rousseau argues - developed with time, in concert with human needs (1986: 245-149). As people's dealings with each other become more involved, the character of language changes: 'language becomes more exact and clear' (1986: 249). Rousseau further observes that written language and spoken language are distinct from one another, with writing serving as an external supplement to vocal language: 'The art of writing does not in any way depend on that of speaking' (1986: 251). Rousseau's position relies on an opposition of writing and speech, distinct and separate from one another. It is also an illustration of what we saw Derrida terms *logocentrism*: the privileging of speech over writing. To this end, Rousseau locates meaning in speech, while writing is simply a tool to transcribe ideas. In Rousseau's words: 'One conveys one's sentiments in speaking, and one's ideas in writing' (1986: 253). Speech is immediate, natural, while writing cannot genuinely convey sentiment because it is mediated. Thus writing is understood as being a signifier of thoughts, ideas, and is always secondary. For Rousseau, writing is measured, restricted, even confined and inauthentic: 'In writing one is compelled to use every word in conformity with common usage' (1986: 253). There is a sense here that writing is somehow impersonal, inflexible, even contrived, as opposed to speech: 'but a speaker alters meanings by his tone of voice, determining them as he wishes; since he is less constrained to be clear, he stresses forcefulness more' (1986: 253).

Tracing the development of various forms of writing, Rousseau argues that the transition to written language signifies a change in economic and political power dynamics, as writing is associated with the development of culture (1986: 249-254). Rousseau writes: '[t]he cruder the writing, the more ancient the language' (1986: 249). Rousseau's notion of writing as an indicator of progress further cements the conceptualisation of writing as 'external to' the 'natural', which is speech.

For Derrida, Rousseau's commitment to the *exteriority* of the system of writing is problematic as it relies on a contrived binary that privileges speech over writing: it is an expression of the tradition of *logocentrism* that has shaped western philosophy. Here, it might be helpful to recall my earlier argument about the *exteriority of violence* represented in Manichaeism. As a reminder, I argued that the Manichaean framework of violence relies on externality and binaries (such as violator - violated, morality - violence) resulting in a division that tends to privilege one side over another, thus

¹⁶⁴ Specifically, Rousseau argues in the *Essay* that language developed in warm climates and then migrated to colder climates: 'Mankind, born in the warm climates, spreads to the cold ones; there it increases, and eventually flows back to the warm ones' (Rousseau 1986: 260).

reinforcing a sense of separation. We saw how Freud and Girard's narratives of ontology of violence result in the emergence of morality from the primordial moment of violence – morality is the opposite of violence, but also necessarily separate from and *external to* violence: consequently morality is deemed the preferred cultured response, while violence is relegated to the realm of nature and impulse. This sense of privileging of one side over another and an entrenched sense of division is evident too in *logocentrism*, where speech is privileged over writing, and writing is seen as already external to a system of meaning. In other words, writing is secondary, external to, and merely a representation of speech.

Let us return to Derrida, whose deconstruction of Rousseau is doubly meaningful because in seeking to challenge Rousseau's assumptions, Derrida shows the interiority of exteriority (1997: 314). He disrupts the order and logic of Rousseau's argument by using the very tools Rousseau marshals in his work. For Rousseau, writing is supplementary to speech and the history of writing is that of articulation. Rousseau writes: 'Anyone who studies the history and progress of languages will see that as utterings [*voix*] grow increasingly monotone, consonants will increase in number, and that as accents disappear and quantities are equalized, they are replaced by grammatical combinations and new articulations' (Rousseau 1986: 249). As Derrida interprets Rousseau, articulation is a process of voice becoming sound, of sound becoming speech, and of speech becoming writing. Once such a sequence is initiated, the process of becoming this sound, this cry, this voice, that is the becoming-language 'is the movement in which spoken plenitude begin to become what it is through losing itself, hollowing itself out, breaking itself, articulating itself' (Derrida 1997: 270). Thus, Rousseau locates the origin of writing in language at the point where articulation emerges from a cry or other vocalised sound. This brings to mind an indelible, natural, inarticulate sound – one that, over time, becomes increasingly defined and recognised. Subsequently, once it is articulated, it can be conveyed into writing. This reasoning is unsatisfactory for Derrida because, as he goes on to demonstrate, the gesture of writing is always already in speech in the very process that Rousseau identifies as language becoming (or articulation). Writing, says Derrida, takes place before and within speech (Derrida 1997: 315). In other words, since writing is not an image of speech, not a representation of it, nor a signifier of speech, writing is at once internal – and external – to speech. It is here that I propose we can see resonances between Kabblistic notions of writing and speech, for as we will see, Kabbalah speaks of a writing that comes before writing.

Derrida begins his argument in 'the Supplement' by recalling Rousseau's observation in *Émile* that he is "ashamed" to speak of the nonsense that is writing' (Derrida 1997: 270; Rousseau 1979:

117).¹⁶⁵ Why ‘ashamed’? asks Derrida. Where does this shame come from?¹⁶⁶ ‘What might one have invested in the signification of writing in order to be ashamed to speak of it? to write of it? to write it?’ (Derrida 1997: 270). Provocatively, Derrida insinuates that writing must have been profoundly meaningful for Rousseau to conjure such a staunch emotion of regret in him. Derrida intimates that Rousseau’s experience of shame is derived from a certain resistance and accuses Rousseau of a ‘laborious ruse to disqualify the interest given to writing’ (Derrida 1997: 270). This, Derrida argues, is indicative of ‘the situation of writing within the history of metaphysics: a debased, lateralised, repressed, displaced theme, yet exercising a permanent and obsessive pressure from the place where it remains held in check’ (Derrida 1997: 270). Had Rousseau confronted ‘writing’ by engaging it more, Derrida speculates that it is possible he would not have been so ‘ashamed’.¹⁶⁷ In short, Derrida demonstrates that writing is a complex matter that cannot be reduced to notions of *supplement* to speech or *signifier* as Rousseau attempts.

This discussion of Rousseau is an example of Derrida’s departure from prevailing structuralist impulses that rely on distinctive binaries which privilege speech over writing. It is indicative of the general thrust of Derrida’s project, his critique of structuralism, and his attempt to dismantle the variants of philosophical thought that rely on such binaries. If we return to my concern with the question of whether circumcision can be thought of as writing, Derrida’s approach to writing is useful because he frames writing in a way that goes beyond the traditional notion of writing that characterises Rousseau’s argument, namely writing in a restricted sense. Derrida’s development of *writing in general* allows us to think of writing as embedded in *systems of meaning* and broader social, historical, linguistic structures rather than as simple representation and signifier of speech. From Derrida, we have the observation that we are always already embedded in a system of language. This prepares the groundwork for thinking about circumcision as writing since – in Derrida’s famous words – ‘there is no outside text’ (Derrida 1997: 158). In other words, we are always already embedded in a system of language that is has no stable resting point. If there is no

¹⁶⁵ *Émile, or: On Education* ([1762] 1979) is Rousseau’s treatise on education and the nature of man. Rousseau’s quote in full is: ‘Shall I speak now of writing? No. I am ashamed of playing with this kind of foolishness in an educational treatise’ (1979: 117). Writing is seemingly a trifling matter.

¹⁶⁶ Later in Derrida’s work, the concept of ‘shame’ will take on a more prominent role, particularly in his work on the question of the animal. One example is found in his lecture ‘*The Animal That Therefore I Am*’ (2004). There, Derrida provides an analysis of shame as both a sign of vulnerable exposure and a provocation to exploit the vulnerability of others.

¹⁶⁷ A relationship between shame and writing surfaces further on in ‘the Supplement’ where Derrida writes of ‘writing beyond good and evil’ (Derrida 1997: 314), a nod to Rousseau’s association of shame and writing, but also a meditation on Nietzsche. Indeed, by invoking Nietzsche’s famous treatise ‘Beyond Good and Evil’, we can see Derrida’s attempts at a new paradigm of thinking beyond dogmatic, pre-established binary oppositions.

reality independent of language, it becomes quite possible, even helpful, to conceive of circumcision as text, as writing.

To sum up: As Derrida lays it out in *Of Grammatology*, writing in general opens the way to a distinction between speech-as-presence and writing-as-representation. Says Derrida: 'If "writing" signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign (and that is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs' (Derrida 1997: 45). Derrida's comments here reveal that the departure from traditional notions of writing and language only indicates that language is everywhere; in other words, writing is not secondary to spoken language, nor is it the product of speech. In short, the meaningfulness of writing is not dependent upon speech: writing in itself is meaningful. This latter point is of specific relevance for me. Recall that I seek to draw a connection between circumcision and writing in order to make the case for *milah* that is at once the cut and the word. In this sense, circumcision as writing is doubly meaningful: not only as the mark of the Jew initiating the boy into the male lineage, but also that the cut itself is a writing that is already endowed with meaning. Thus, Derrida's contribution is two-fold. First, Derrida enables us to think of writing as more than words inscribed on page but as 'writing in general' – writing that is already embedded in a system of language and meaning-making. Second, as we saw previously, if circumcision is the indelible mark of the Abrahamic covenant, if we understand circumcision as writing, we can posit that the mark of the covenant is written into the body of every Jewish infant, one who is then written into Jewish history. I want to develop this claim by analysing another one of Derrida's texts, *Circumfession* (1993). Here, Derrida discusses circumcision as text in the context of a broader discussion of violence.

Circumfession

Circumfession (1993) is one part of a collaborative project entitled *Jacques Derrida* undertaken by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida. Visually and conceptually, *Jacques Derrida* is an extraordinary feat. The book is composed of two main parts: *Derridabase* written by Bennington, and *Circumfession*, a confessional narrative written by Derrida.¹⁶⁸ In *Circumfession*, we see equivalence between circumcision and deconstruction as Derrida develops an overarching thesis about a cut that separates one from - and unites one with, a community. To this end, John D. Caputo (1997) argues that, for Derrida, 'deconstruction *is* circumcision, where circumcision cuts open to the event of the other, thus constituting the breach that opens the way to the *tout autre*

¹⁶⁸ There is a third section, 'Acts (The Law of Genre)' that is composed of Derrida's curriculum vitae and bibliography.

[emphasis in original]' (Caputo 1997: xxv). For Caputo, as for Derrida, deconstruction can be understood as 'a certain cut and hence as a certain circumcision, and circumcision can be taken as another name for deconstruction' (Caputo 1997: 233).

Returning to *Jacques Derrida*, I'd like to describe the layout and content of the two texts that compose the collection. Bennington's *Derridabase* and Derrida's *Circumfession* are laid out horizontally against one another, separated by a dividing line. The visual of the text is striking, as Derrida's *Circumfession* runs along the bottom of Bennington's *Derridabase* appearing like an extended footnote.

Geoffrey Bennington (hereon G., as Derrida refers to him in *Circumfession*) has attempted to create a *Derridabase* - a database of all Derridean concepts - with the intent of explaining and exposing Derrida (Bennington and Derrida 1993: 1). G.'s reason for compiling a *Derridabase* is to explicate the comprehensive writing of Derrida, an exposition of 'the totality of J.D.'s thought' (Bennington and Derrida 1993: 1). Inspired by computers, G.'s intention is to systemise Derrida's thought, turning it into an interactive program that would - in principle - be accessible to anyone. For Derrida, the task is to show how G.'s *Derridabase* system must remain open. Wanting to be unpredictable in order to escape the confines of the eponymous database, perhaps even to short-circuit G.'s program, Derrida confides a secret he has yet to divulge in his career, one that he reveals to be everything he has ever written about - his circumcision (1993: 70). We read on as the philosopher writes about his own body, and the wound of circumcision. Other than this intimate revelation regarding Derrida's body (and explicitly, intimately, shockingly, his penis), the revelation of circumcision is significant as it speaks to the philosopher's Judaism and Judaic roots, a topic he has always been reluctant to discuss. For example, in a 1984 interview with Richard Kearney Derrida states: 'I have never invoked the Jewish tradition in any "rooted" or direct manner. Though I was born a Jew, I do not work or think within a living Jewish tradition. So if there is a Judaic dimension to my thinking which may from time to time have spoken in or through me, this has never assumed the form of an explicit fidelity or debt to that culture' (Derrida interviewed in Kearney [1984] 2004: 139). Despite Derrida's avowal that his Judaism has been nothing but peripheral to his work, *Circumfession* tells a different story. For everything that Derrida has ever written about, he confides in us, is his circumcision. As I show further on below, circumcision has been present in many of Derrida's other works, too - it is an explicitly Jewish cut that has haunted Derrida's writing from the start. And it is perhaps the nature of the cut to be both present and absent - such that Derrida is able to not write of it, while writing nothing but it. If we think of deconstruction too as a cut, insofar as it

locates presence in absence, we can consider whether circumcision carries a trace in Derrida's philosophy. In *Circumfession* we learn of Derrida's Jewish wound, his Jewish body, and Jewish secret. This is why I argue *Circumfession* is such a significant text.

Elsewhere, in 'The Animal' (2004), Derrida explains that the 'animal question' is all he has ever written about. I propose that Derrida uses the question of the animal and circumcision as rhetorical methods in deliberating on the problem of defining oneself. For the animal and circumcision are both cuts: the animal takes the place of 'The Other', while circumcision too 'others' the Jew. Derrida argues in 'The Animal' that throughout generations of philosophy the animal stood for 'The Other', meaning 'the thing that is not human'. Derrida applies the 'Animal Question' as a rhetorical invocation to debate what separates humans from animals. This same rhetoric appears in *Circumfession*, where he speaks about the circumcisional cut, a double movement of incision and excision, which separates and unites Jew from non-Jew, a cut that circumscribes, delimits and defines identity. I suggest that this 'cut' has inspired Derrida's corpus (both carnal and textual); as such, the animal question and circumcision are methods of rhetoric that expound the problem of the cut and its role in identity formation.

Circumfession (1993) is arguably Derrida's most autobiographical text. Its confessional quality reflects the intimate nature of the stories Derrida divulges from his childhood, in particular his experiences of growing up as a Jew in Algiers. We read about the passing of his beloved mother, and about the death of his older brother before Derrida had been born. In the course of writing about his dying mother, Derrida reveals to us the secret of his circumcision, which he defines circumcision at one point as follows: 'a circumcision is my size, it takes my body, it turns around me to envelope me in its blade strokes, they pull upwards, a spiral raises and hardens me, I am erect in my circumcision for centuries like the petrified memory and an ammonite' (1993: 242). There is a deeply rooted bond between self and circumcision. Derrida speaks of circumcision in the same breath as memory and body. The lines 'a circumcision is my size, it takes my body' present an image of circumcision that transgresses the pathological: circumcision is 'my' size – it is the size of the whole, of the self. 'I am erect in my circumcision for centuries', Derrida says, in a statement that perhaps ties him all the way back to Abraham: the petrified memory of thousands of years of Judaism and - much like Sofsky's discussion of ritual as shared memory – for Derrida circumcision is memory inscribed in flesh. Rendering these lines even more curious is the fact that circumcision is an absence – it is the removal of the foreskin. This absence, however, 'takes my body': an absence

that is nevertheless present in the immediate materiality of the body, and hence also in every immediate experience of that body.

It is worth noting here that the nexus of body and language and the theme of circumcision have been significant in many of Derrida's other works.¹⁶⁹ Elsewhere, in 'Abraham, the Other' (2007), Derrida suggests that ever since the 1960s, circumcision has haunted his works, and not only the ones that explicitly mention it – such as *Glas*, *The Post Card*, or *Circumfession*. All his texts, Derrida says, 'consign an indefinitely insomniac vigil over the event called "circumcision"' (Derrida 2007: 17). Much like deconstruction, which is 'something which happens and which happens inside' (Derrida interviewed in Caputo 1997: 9), circumcision takes place. In other words, circumcision happens, and this happening is full of meaning, of presence. What I want to suggest here is that contrary to the positions of intactivists and activists, who perceive circumcision in terms of a procedure that takes place either as a moral imperative for health in the case of the latter, or as a violation in the case of the former, and who understand circumcision as the manipulation of the body by an external person, Derrida calls this internal-external divide into question. Indeed, Derrida's personal testimony that 'circumcision, that's all I've ever talked about...' (1993: 70) reveals to us how significant the indelible mark of circumcision can become for those inscribed by it.

We return to Derrida's *Circumfession*, a text composed of 59 paragraphs, each consisting in turn of a single sentence, and which taken together correspond to Derrida's age at the time of writing, thereby further underpinning a correlation between life and word. So we can think of the fifty-nine periods (periods of text, periods of life) as bearing testimony to the nexus of circumcision and writing. Recall Derrida's words: 'a circumcision is my size, it takes my body'. The circumcision revealed in the folds of the page is folded into Derrida's story, Derrida's body, and 'turns around me to envelope me in its blade strokes'. The fact that Derrida 'traces out' his circumcision throughout the 59 periods of *Circumfession* is significant: circumcision marks itself on the body, embodied – 'it takes my size' – such that circumcision writes itself into a life story.

The entwining of language and body recurs throughout *Circumfession*. In one place Derrida writes of this circumcision: 'my own skin thus torn off, in the very place, along the crural artery where my books find their inspiration, they are written first in skin' (Derrida 1993: 227-228). This is an evocative sentence, and we should take a minute to reflect on it. In form and substance,

¹⁶⁹ Some notable authors on this matter are philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo (see Caputo 1997), literary critic John Hillis Miller (see Miller 2009), philosopher Jones Irwin (see Irwin 2010), and literary theorist Inge Birgitte Siegumfeldt (see Siegumfeldt 2001; 2005a; 2005b).

Circumfession reflects Derrida's larger project on language: deconstruction, that is, of making meaning in assumed contradictions, dis-affiliation, and relations to the other.¹⁷⁰ As I noted above, severing is part of the deconstructive strategy, such that the words 'cut' and 'wound' feature prominently in Derrida's work both in *Circumfession* and *elsewhere*. Here, in this fantastic sentence we see Derrida's deconstruction at play: the very place of the cut of circumcision ('my own skin torn off' – the foreskin removed) is the place where Derrida's 'books find their inspiration, they are written first in skin'. In the place of the circumcisional cut, Derrida's *milah* (his word and his circumcision), we also find the place of inspiration for his books: they 'are written first in skin'. We recognise a clear intersection between cut and word, circumcision and writing, severance and creation. Already we can see that for Derrida the cut of circumcision is productive, generative, and full of meaning.

One might say that in *Circumfession*, Derrida re-experiences the blood of circumcision, and exposes all his wounds. This is an intimate gesture of revelation where we witness the bloody violence of circumcision flow across the pages of the text – a continuous violence, if you will. In fact, the opening pages of *Circumfession* talk about 'blood', which perhaps allude to the covenant of circumcision, of *milah*, that covenant written through blood. But what Derrida describes is also accompanied by fear: he envisages syringes finding veins to draw blood from and the fear these syringes evoke in their search for a passage into flesh. This fear is followed by the description of the continuous flow of blood as the instrument disappears in the bloody passage and then, the fear that the flow of blood could have kept flooding (Derrida 1993: 6-8). He writes of the threat, his fear, that the blood will never stop, that the whole body will drain of the blood that is both the source of life and of writing. Further on Derrida writes 'dare I say of writing if I compare the pen to a syringe' (1993: 10): the pen scribes out on the page, it *fills the page*, inscribing marks upon it while a syringe sucks, drains, empties. The pen is 'that very hard weapon with which one must inscribe, incise'

¹⁷⁰ Also in *Circumfession*, Derrida reflects on the experience of his mother's slow and painful death. Weaved through Derrida's quasi-confessional passages are quotations from St Augustine's *Confessions* in Latin: 'I am constantly playing, seriously playing with this, and quoting sentences from the *Confessions* in Latin, all the while trying, through my love and admiration for St Augustine – I have enormous and immense admiration for him – to ask questions about a number of axioms, not only in his *Confessions* but in his politics, too. So there is a love story and a deconstruction between us' (Derrida 1996: 21). Indeed, *Circumfession* is strongly influenced by Augustine's *Confessions*. Points of contact are even drawn between the dying mothers in both accounts: Augustine's Monica on the one hand, and Derrida's Georgette, also known by her 'sacred name' (Derrida 1993: 19) Esther. Writes Derrida, 'but what these two women had in common is the fact that Santa Monica, the name of the place in California near to which I am writing, also ended her days, as my mother will too, on the other side of the Mediterranean, far from her land [...] and the son [who] reports her wishes' (1993: 19). In her treatise on *Circumfession* entitled *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a young Jewish saint* (2004), Hélène Cixous draws out correlations between the lamentations and confessions of the Christian Saint on the one hand, and Derrida the mortal Jew on the other.

(1993: 10-12). If a pen was a syringe ‘the blood delivers itself all alone’ – the syringe need only suck the blood. The pen is different. Writing entails work, responsibility, a violence of inscribing (1993: 12). We get a sense that writing is a violence that one simultaneously participates in and produces.

Why has Derrida chosen to open *Circumfession* in this way? Not only has the author commenced his text with words of letting blood from his veins, he laments to us: ‘if only the pen was a syringe!’ Derrida insists that this is a text written in violence, in toil, in pain, in blood, but not only this text, but rather that all writing entails such risk, entails such violence. What might we make of Derrida’s claim that ‘circumcision, that’s all I ever talked about’ in such a context (Derrida 1993: 70)? If Derrida’s writing finds its inspiration in the place of severed flesh, in the place of his circumcision, his books are ‘written first in skin’. We can take from this the value of the lived experience of writing as something intrinsically meaningful to him, to us. Writing does not only necessitate ink and page but the inscription of the body too is then also made into writing. To this extent, writing takes place on the body; it is carnal, embodied, modifying, and shaping.

Further on in *Circumfession*, Derrida draws out the relationship between knife and pen. He writes that circumcision is ‘the first event to write itself right on my body’ (1993: 120) carved with the ‘thin blade of the writing knife, “*circumcision equipment*” [emphasis in original]’ (1993: 244). There is a relation here between writing and cutting, between circumcision and word. The knife is not only a knife that cuts, but it is a knife that writes. In describing a knife as a writing implement, we can observe a similarity with the pen that Derrida describes in the opening pages of the text, the pen with which one must ‘inscribe, incise’ (1993: 10). The violence of writing (‘thin blade of the writing knife’) resonates with the ‘violence of circumcision’ (1993: 135) not least because the writing knife is ‘circumcision equipment’.

So Derrida helps us draw links between violence and writing as well as provides us with conceptual tools to think of circumcision as writing. As we have seen, in *Circumfession*, writing and circumcision are at times synonymous. Consider this in relation to circumcision: one carries this writing with them their whole life for it is marked in their flesh. Writing is always a moment simultaneously of presence and absence, death and life, beginning and end.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Bennington gives the following example: The sentence ‘I am dead’ written in a letter just before a suicide or execution. On this sentence, Bennington says: ‘It is not necessary for me to be dead for you to be able to read me, but it is necessary for you to be able to read me even if I am dead’ (Bennington and Derrida 1993: 51). What is here called ‘death’ is ‘the generic name we shall give to my absence in general with respect to what I write... When you read me, not only do you not know whether or not I am dead, but whether what I write is really what I meant, fully

For now, there are a couple of final points that I wish to tease out with respect to Derrida's treatment of 'writing' in *Circumfession*. We might begin by asking what Derrida means when he says that circumcision is 'the first event to write itself right on my body' (1993: 210)? What exactly is this 'writing on the body'? First, we must understand that language and the body are not separate structures for Derrida. He observes in a conversation with philosopher Richard Kearney that: 'In every reading there is a corps-à-corps between reader and text' (Derrida interviewed in Kearney 1984: 126). This corps-à-corps, this body to body, can be thought of as the body of the reader and the body of the text (corpus). But this corpus is also a corps, a living body of text. Thus in every reading there is a meeting of bodies, both textual and carnal. To this end, we can conceive of the act of reading as intimate, naked, exposed just as we understand text as a phenomenological experience.

Next, one of the ways Derrida applies the rhetoric of circumcision is by presenting it as a cut that separates one from and unites one to a community. This reflects the notion of severance which, as I have already observed, is part of deconstructive strategy. The experience of separation and connection is discernable throughout *Circumfession* in the anecdotes Derrida shares of his childhood in Algiers. These passages demonstrate tension between belonging and not belonging, community and exclusion, all of which exhibit a certain severing: such as 'in my family and among the Algerian Jews, one scarcely ever said "circumcision" but "baptism", not "Bar Mitzvah" but "communion" (Derrida 1993: 72), or 'I pretended to learn Hebrew so as to read it without understanding it' (1993: 288), and 'French Algeria in its Governor-General, without the intervention of any Nazi, had expelled me from school and withdrawn my French citizenship' (1993: 288), and 'thus expelled, I became the outside'¹⁷² (1993: 289). We see the cut exercised by the force of the state (such as with being expelled from school and having his French citizenship revoked as a child) and

compos mentis, at the moment of writing, etc. That there be this fundamental and irreducible uncertainty is part of the essential nature of writing' (Bennington and Derrida 1993: 51).

¹⁷² Elsewhere, in a candid interview with philosopher Maurizio Ferraris published as *A Taste for the Secret* (2001) Derrida comments further on how the event of being expelled from school impacted him: 'The first few months after my expulsion was a very bad time; I had begun to experience anti-Semitism outside, in the streets, in my circle of friends, my old playmates who treated me like a 'dirty Jew' and wouldn't talk to me any more. And, paradoxically, the feeling of not belonging came to affect my relationship with the Jewish community and with the Jewish children who, like me, had been grouped together in the Jewish school. I hated that school. More often than not, without telling my parents, I just cut classes. I was on very bad terms with the Jewish community, which was trying to get organized and adapt to the situation. In that period an obscure feeling arose in me that has, I think, remained to this day - a trauma that caused me not only to cultivate a sort of not-belonging to French culture and to France in general, but also, in some way, to reject my be- longing to Judaism' (Derrida and Ferraris 2001: 38-39). In essence we can identify here an articulation of Derrida's (non)belonging, a 'double gesture' that would go on to define his curiosities, his work, his method of investigation. In experiencing anti-Semitism as a child Derrida's response was 'no, I do not belong to this group', while at the same time the fact that he was the target of anti-Semitism indicated that yes, he was part of that group. And further, that this association that he did not want defined for him what school he could go to, what kids he could play with, how others would see him.

the abyssal tensions between Judaism and Christianity (not ‘circumcision’ but ‘baptism’, not ‘Bar Mitzvah’ but ‘Communion’...). Elsewhere, Derrida’s contemporary and close friend Hélène Cixous would write the following statement about Derrida: ‘Was I Jewish, he will have wondered his whole life’ (Cixous [2001] 2004: 1). Cixous’s use of future perfect tense ‘will have’ is curious. Is it only in death that Derrida’s ruminations on his Judaism will stop? Again, we are reminded of the continuous flow of blood that opens *Circumfession*. Only here, it is the blood of Jewish lineage that pulsates in Derrida’s wound, flesh and books ‘written in skin’. Only in death will this blood stop flowing, and only in death the question of the Jew will stop asking itself.

From this discussion of circumcision as writing we see how Derrida breaks with traditional notions of writing as inscription on page which is secondary to speech. In *Circumfession*, we witness the nature of Derrida’s departure from writing in the restricted sense, that is - writing conceived narrowly as letters and words on a page - and the way he complicates the nature of ‘writing’ such that it becomes linked to identity and meaning. Thus Derrida’s work epitomises my argument that it is possible to think of the cut of circumcision as writing, as *milah*, as word embodied in flesh. But Derrida also helps me to conceive of the relation between circumcision and violence in a productive manner. Recall that in *Of Grammatology* Derrida asks ‘what links writing to violence? And what must violence be in order for something in it to be equivalent to the operation of the trace?’¹⁷³ (Derrida 1997: 101). He argues that violence is thus bound up in language, but also in *différance*, that is in systems of deferential forces. In essence, Derrida argues that the structure of writing marks the structure of violence. This happens when everyday writing (or indeed violence) is the reduced and constrained derivative of a more primary and constitutive arch-writing (which we have previously considered as *writing in general*) and arch-violence (this is the very condition of both writing/violence and its opposite speech/nonviolence). Violence and writing are bound up with each other: in their originary forms, they provide a foundation that is inscriptive, differential and to this extent - violent.

¹⁷³ I offer a basic definition of the Derridean ‘trace’. We already established that writing cannot be a reproduction of speech since neither precedes the other. To this end, writing is not only the written form (*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*) but rather it is the articulation of the trace. The *trace* disrupts the perception of an origin or centre, but rather it embodies a sense of temporality both of language and meaning. Consider the following: the meaning of a sign (for example a word or an object) is produced from the difference it has from other signs. To bring to mind a sign is also to bring to mind what we might call ‘the binary opposite’ to the sign. In this regards, the meaning of a sign is generated by what it means, as well as by what it does not mean. For example, when one brings to mind concepts such as woman, morality, or writing, one simultaneously evokes the concepts of man, violence, or speech. Thus we can conceive of the trace as being the shadow of *other-meaning* that is simultaneously brought to mind along with meaning.

How might the concepts of 'writing' and 'text' enable me to think through the morality and ethics of circumcision, and how might they bear on a relation between violence and morality? Is it possible that by thinking circumcision in terms of text and as a mode of originary violence we are able to move beyond a narrative of mutilation and consider circumcision as generative and conducive of identity? Recall that for intactivists and activists, circumcision exists in a particular moral binary. For intactivists it is conceptualised as unethical behaviour as it infringes on the moral value of autonomy and for activists circumcision is driven by health. On either side circumcision is moral or immoral. To think of Jewish ritual circumcision is to complicate this problem of morality as the ritual *is* violent. It *does* cut through flesh. Yet in the same vein we are beginning to see how the violent gesture of circumcision might be conducive to the process of becoming, of identity, of how one comes to know himself.

The question of authorship

Let us now consider the question of authorship in relation to writing, violence and circumcision. As we have seen, Derrida's project involves rethinking writing, which has itself customarily been viewed as representational, restricted as a referent of speech, and, in as much as it is long lasting, as seemingly independent of any one moment, author, or event. Derrida's challenge to writing in the narrow sense is clear. But how does Derrida's theory treat the matter of 'authorship'? Put differently, to what extent does deconstruction problematise the concept of an 'author' in as much as it does the concept of writing? In other words, if we are all embedded in a linguistic system, what does this mean for 'authorship'? My endeavour is to extend this discussion to the activist and intactivist notion that there must be an executer of violence (circumcision), that is always already external from and independent of the being circumcised.

We return to Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington's text *Jacques Derrida* (1993). Recall that the text is comprised of two parallel discussions, a *Derridabase* compiled by Bennington and *Circumfession*, written by Derrida. Derrida's *Circumfession* lays bare his struggle with Bennington's attempt to systemise Derrida's writing as text at the same time as it offers a narrative of Derrida's own 'textual' body, that is his circumcision: 'the word for word, מילה, pronounce it *milah*, which names the word and circumcision' (emphasis in original, Derrida 1993: 88). I propose to focus on the relationship between Derrida's confessional statements and Bennington's narrative (hereon after G. keeping with Derrida's name for him in *Circumfession*) in order to demonstrate the complexities of authorship. I propose that the attempt to contain Derrida in a *Derridabase* treats Derrida as text – he can be written and explored as text, as a program, systematised, accessed – and read – at any time,

by anyone. This is only possible because the all-knowing author G. has the capacity to facilitate the Derrida-text in a way that can be explained and thus be meaningful to the readers who access it, giving them command over what Derrida has written (Miller 2009: 30). This discussion allows me to challenge one of the fundamental tenets of Manichaeism: the idea of an external agent (indeed author) who exercises violence, which is a result of the separation and division that characterise Manichaean opposition.

First, let us treat the question of authorship. Early on in *Circumfession* Derrida writes that ‘Geoff . . . remains very close to God’ (1993: 16). It is interesting to note that both Geoff and God begin with the same letter, G. We might argue that by referring to Bennington as G. Derrida is playing on the sentiment of the ‘all-knowing Author-God’, a tongue-in-cheek gesture that refers to the fact that G. is attempting to write Derrida into a database, to in-scribe him. In short, by choosing to refer to Bennington as G., Derrida alludes to the all-knowing role G. has assumed in writing the *Derridabase*. This observation prompts us to ask, who is the author of Derrida’s thought? Is it G., the ‘author’ of the *Derridabase*, or is it Derrida, who seeks to circumvent G’s project by planting a virus by way of the ‘revelation’ of his circumcision? At very least, we can observe a struggle between Derrida and G. in the text that is *Jacques Derrida*.

In reconstructing Derrida’s system of thought, G. tries to show that ‘Derrida is the one who . . . demonstrates (or at least claims) that... to be completed by a statement in apodictic form, probably “There is nothing outside the text” (1993: 6). This is a nod not only to the *Derridabase*, but also to Derrida’s attempt to disrupt it through his own writing (as text and as circumcision). Put simply, this claim applies to Derrida in two ways: first, insofar as his own ideas are being collated into a *Derridabase*; and second, insofar as he writes about the writing of the body through *milah*, which Derrida refers to in *Circumfession* as ‘circumcisional text’ (Derrida 1993: 70).

The author-text nature of this relationship – of G.’s expositional writing of Derrida, manifest in the ‘database’ of Derrida’s thought – is intensified by the subject being written (Derrida), who is himself attempting to create a narrative independent of, but also a response to, the author G. Here we have two authors, one attempting to write the other and the other attempting to out-write (or even more accurately, underwrite) the author, ultimately as an attempt to re-enrol ‘the’ author. Derrida articulates the tension arising from this battle in these terms: ‘I posthume as I breathe . . . that’s the rule I’d like to follow and which in the end arbitrates the duel between what I’m writing and what G. will have written up there, besides or above me, *on* me, but also *for* me, in my favour, towards me

and in my place [emphasis in original]¹⁷⁴ (Derrida 1993: 26). There is something extremely evocative in Derrida's formulation, 'I posthume as I breathe': the poetic recognition that every breath brings one closer to death.¹⁷⁵ What is at stake in the idea that G. and Derrida must face each other, and that they must face each other in battle? To me, it is a reflection on the violence of writing, one that is helpfully explicated by a discussion of circumcision as word.

The relation between author and text that is played out on the pages of *Circumfession* can be conceptualised as a self - other relation. Of course, Derrida's project is to disrupt assumed divisions and to complicate the notion of origin. Herein is the violent struggle of the duel: the demand that the 'thing' surrender its origin and submit to a system of representation. For G. to create this comprehensive *Derridabase*, a database or systemisation of Derrida's thought, this means that Derrida must be both the source and the origin. If the *Derridabase* is G.'s attempt to systemise Derrida's thought, for it to be successful, there is the companion notion that Derrida is the source and origin of the concepts systematised in *Derridabase*. But of course this is problematic because Derrida's aim is to complicate the possibility of a single 'origin'. Indeed, he develops the concept *différance* to refer to differential forces, the tearing of any 'origin', indeed, the impossibility of 'origin'. In other words, Derrida is the subject of G.'s *Derridabase*, but he is also the subject wanting to attain the role of author, that is creator, by writing (creating) a narrative that attempts to 'escap[e] the proposed systemisation, surprising it' (1993: 1). The purpose of G.'s text is to predict and systemise Derrida, without quoting him and without any biographical detail. '[T]his is my corpus' Derrida writes, 'the set of sentences I have signed of which he has literally not quoted one, not one in its totality...a strange choice when one is writing a book on someone who writes books' (Derrida 1993: 27).

¹⁷⁴ G. speaking *for* Derrida, in his place, evokes in Derrida notions of death, demise, finitude. When one no longer has a voice, the absence of language evokes Adam's originary sin.

¹⁷⁵ Derrida was a man obsessed with death. In conversation with Ferraris, years before he would receive that fatal cancer diagnosis, Derrida said: 'I think about nothing but death, I think about it all the time, ten seconds don't go by without the imminence of the thing being there' (Derrida and Ferraris 2001: 88). Another example comes from *H.C. for Life, that is to Say...* (2006), which is a touching testament to his and Hélène Cixous' friendship, but also a personal revelation of how drawn Derrida is to death (while Hélène Cixous, H. C., takes the side of life, Derrida is drawn to the side of death). We return to *Circumfession* and to the rule Derrida follows, which is one of tension between living and dying. This rule, 'I posthume as I breathe', arbitrates the duel, the tension, the challenge, between Derrida's writing and Bennington's writing on Derrida, but also as if Derrida is preparing for a time when he could not write for himself, when someone else would write for him. In the last interview Derrida would ever give some two months before his death, he was asked 'where are you with your wish to 'know how to live'?' (This is a reference to Derrida's opening in *Specters of Marx* ([1993] 2006) where he writes 'Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: 'I'd finally like to know how to live'.') Derrida replies, 'no, I never learned-to-live. Absolutely not! Learning to live ought to mean learning to die - to acknowledge, to accept, an absolute mortality - without positive outcome, or resurrection, or redemption, for oneself or for anyone else' (Derrida interviewed in *Le Monde* 2004).

What can we make of this autobiographical text of an author that is himself simultaneously in the process of being written? We see Derrida's desire to escape systemisation and to extend beyond G.'s writing of Derrida. Derrida underwrites G., but more importantly he is overwritten by G.'s writing:¹⁷⁶ Derrida's text is written with G. in mind, who is constantly referred back to and mentioned throughout the text, a text which eventually becomes 'Everybody's Autobiography' (capitals in original, 1993: 311). In this sense, then, we might say that we are all writing this text insofar as we read a text which is written about all of us: recall that this is a text about confessions, about death, about circumcision, about severing from community, and a severing of flesh, that reflects the deep divide within. But because *Circumfession* can be described as 'everyone's autobiography', we immediately too become part of this author-text duel.

Derrida's deconstruction of authorship allows me to challenge an important principle of Manichaean violence: the idea of an external author who exercises violence. This notion of externality relies on division, a dynamic of separation that enables the perpetrator to exercise violence on another. Following Derrida's deconstruction of authorship I wish to suggest that another way of thinking about authorship (indeed, the author/agent of violence) is as always already implicated in text: author and text are not distinct from one another, not oppositions. Taking this argument to its logical conclusion we could say there is even an *impossibility of externality*, for if it is true that there is *no outside text*, and text is system of making meaning of the world, thus author does not exist *outside of or external to* text.

So far, I have sought to establish a relationship between writing, violence and circumcision. Derrida was useful for two reasons. First, the concept of 'writing in general' gives us the theoretical tools to think of circumcision as writing; and second, as we have seen, his deconstruction of authorship allows me to challenge the idea of an external author who exercises/authors violence. Through Derrida's work, we are able to think of violence and writing as elements in a system of meaning, both bound up with each other. Thus there is no one singular external author to exercise violence, since author is always already part of the system of language through which we experience the world. Through Derrida we are able to challenge the idea that writing and violence are causal, products of external intervention (i.e. originator of text/violence), but rather they are always already generative, participating in a system of meaning-making.

¹⁷⁶ Derrida's attempt to escape systemisation and out-write G. is only successful insofar as he is able to surprise the all-knowing G. and expose the ostensibly unexpected wound of circumcision, however, if G. is indeed God, then we could say that Derrida's circumcision is a word that is *already written* into the covenant of the text that is the Derridabase, further complicating the notion of 'origing'.

Derrida's *Circumfession* illustrates the significance of circumcision and helps me to draw some initial connections between text, circumcision, and violence as elements of creation that will be developed in my concluding chapters.

Judaism and writing

Here, I seek to demonstrate that the way that Derrida opens up the questions of writing and 'authorship' has relevance for Jewish ritual circumcision. My starting point is to consider the question of how Judaic scholarship approaches 'writing'? Does it conceptualise writing in a 'restricted sense' - to borrow from Derrida - as inscriptions on page? Or does Judaic scholarship understand writing as what Derrida terms 'writing in general'; meaning writing is generative, and conducive of meaning? My aim in addressing these questions is to make a connection between Derrida's notion of writing in general, the writing of Judaic scholarship and the ritual of circumcision.

One way to approach my questions comes from Israeli Anthropologist Yoram Bilu who has the following insight: 'Methodologically, given the primacy of the text in Judaism, any contextual analysis of Jewish ceremonial practices has to be supplemented by the textual layers of exegesis that explicate the rites and endow them with surplus meaning' (Bilu 2003: 174). This observation is important for a couple of reasons. First, we cannot separate ritual from text in our analysis; and second, text occupies a place of great importance in Judaism. While the 'text' in Bilu's statement refers to sources such as the Torah, Talmud, Kabbalistic and other rabbinic texts, I propose to extrapolate this claim about the primacy of the text in Judaism to consider how it might bear significance for circumcision as *milah*, a word that is also a religious marking in as much as it is also a wound.

Admittedly, the entire body of Jewish theology with its layers of textual analysis, commentary, and annotation, can be easily overwhelming. The nature of Judaic scholarship is such that many rabbis, philosophers, and other such historically influential people read and comment on core texts, laws, and practices. These layers of interpretation compose the vast body of Jewish knowledge. As 'Judaic scholarship' is an expansive term, it is worth explaining what it means in context of this dissertation. For my purposes, 'Judaic scholarship' refers to systems of thought organised around querying, exploring, challenging, and shaping traditional Jewish knowledge. The particular methods of investigation and hermeneutics that I rely on are the Talmudic tradition and Kabbalah. The Talmud is the primary book of Jewish law and custom. The latter is a tradition of Jewish mysticism, an esoteric school of thought that extends the notion that God created the world through the Hebrew

language into a full linguistic mysticism. The term 'linguistic mysticism' refers to the idea that language is the root and building blocks of all creation, and that through language God enacted creation.

The Kabbalistic tradition is primarily drawn to opening up the secrets of creation in the Torah. Kabbalah 'primarily addresses the nature of God and the secret meaning of the Torah (the core of God's revelations to humanity)' (Lancaster 2006: 11). The Torah is not seen as something apart from this world, as there is a crucial connection between the written word and the world.¹⁷⁷ The essence of Kabbalah is concerned with the Torah which is Judaism's most foundational and sacred text. Kabbalah attempts to reveal the inner secrets of the Torah's divine status. In the Torah as well as Kabbalah, we see the treatment of language as revelation; and particularly in Kabbalah, this can be seen as bringing something like linguistic mysticism into play. Language is the tool in God's creation, and as such has mystical value, as it reflects everything that has been created. In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1995) Gershom Scholem¹⁷⁸ - considered the primary contemporary scholar of Jewish esoteric thought - explains that Kabbalah is characterised by a 'metaphysically positive attitude towards language as God's own instrument' (Scholem 1995: 16). Here, I wish to highlight two points. Firstly we can see how language is a tool in God's creation and secondly, we note that much like Derrida's 'writing in the general sense', Kabbalah has an expansive notion of language in general and writing in particular.

Before we move on let me just explain the Talmudic tradition in brief terms. The Talmudic tradition is one of research and analysis, a method of investigation that, much like Kabbalah, is concerned with the Torah.¹⁷⁹ As intellectual traditions both Talmud and Kabbalah work through hermeneutics and debate, which makes them so relevant and useful for the purposes of this dissertation: they are methods and means of reimagining concepts. If Kabbalah is the tradition of

¹⁷⁷ The intrinsic connection between the Torah and the world is evidenced in the following anecdote: Rabbi Ishmael told a scribe who writes the Torah scroll, 'Be meticulous in your work, for your occupation is a sacred one; should you perchance omit or add one single letter, you would thereby destroy all the universe' (Talmud, Eiruvim 13a). Quite literally, life hangs in the balance of words.

¹⁷⁸ Gershom Scholem (1897 - 1982) was professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Scholem is widely regarded as the founder of contemporary academic study of Kabbalah.

¹⁷⁹ Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a notorious Talmudic scholar, argues: 'Its [the Talmudic method's] main significance lies not in its halakhic conclusions but in the methods of research and analysis by which the conclusions are drawn' (Steinsaltz 2006: 78). While the Talmud is a book of law, and much of its content is dedicated to ruminating on various intricacies of Judaic law - halakha - and concluding on best practices for a Kosher and fulfilling Jewish life, it is important to remember that the Talmud must also be understood as pointing to a method of study and investigation.

Jewish mysticism, the Talmud deals primarily with laws of Jewish life. Both traditions are concerned with circumcision which, as we have seen, is one of the pivotal laws of Judaism.

I find the following Talmudic parable a useful starting point insofar as it helps to illustrate rabbinical commitment to scholarship:

The Talmud (Niddah 30b) teaches that while the child is still in its mother's womb, an angel holding a lamp 'shines over our heads with which we learn the entire Torah and see from one end of the universe to the other'. One Talmudic annotation says that in a sense, learning the entire Torah means knowing the entire blueprint of one's life, as the angel also reveals to the baby in this foetal state his or her whole life purpose (Chaver 2001: Netiv Partzuf Zer Anpin Part II 23a-23b). Importantly, it is an effortless endeavour: the light merely shines overhead and together with the guidance of an angel gives the unborn child the capacity to know past, future, and the sacred Torah in its entirety. According to the Kabbalah this allows one to 'see from one end of the universe to the other', which does not only mean 'from east to west and north to south,' but from the highest point of the spiritual dimension down to the lowest point in our physical world (space), and from the beginning of time to the end (time). The Kabbalah justifies this since in the womb one exists in a bodiless state in which physical brains do not yet limit minds, thus one is not subject to the normal limitations of time and space. At the moment of being born, the child is stuck on the upper lip by the same light-shining angel, an action that erases the Torah from memory (creating the philtrum at the same time). The purpose of life hereon after is to relearn the Torah, a feat that does not come with ease. If in the womb the Torah was learnt effortlessly, in life it will only be revealed through dedication, studiousness, practice, and commitment.

We are surely prompted consider the possibility of a connection between the embryonic embodiment of the Torah and the iteration of *milah* on the flesh of the newly born male. Could circumcision be a corporeal attempt to replicate the ethereal word of God and the Torah, which was at one time known, albeit at the state when one cannot know the true meaning of knowledge and the consequences of forgetting? If such a connection would be possible, it enables us to illustrate that text exists in a continuous process of production since it is continually read by new readers and is continually marked by these readers. Inevitably, the textual body retains the traces of inscription. And here, to illustrate this point, we need only note that the scars of circumcision cannot be erased with time.

As I now go on to show, writing occupies an instrumental role in Jewish cosmology and theology. But does Judaism conceptualise writing in ontological terms insofar as it relates to origin and to being? Might the belief that God created the world with his word (as it is stated in Genesis) have any bearing on the question of ontological writing? I begin to address these questions here and continue to develop them in the concluding chapters to the thesis.

Kabbalah

On account of the complex nature of its teachings and investigation, offering a descriptive summary of Kabbalah is not a simple endeavour.¹⁸⁰ In Hebrew, the root of the word Kabbalah (קבלה) is kuf-beit-lamed (ק-ב-ל), which means: to receive, or accept. Thus Kabbalah is a received teaching or tradition and can also be understood as receiving or accepting teaching. Specifically, Kabbalah refers to the body of received mystical teachings of the Torah.¹⁸¹ Synonymous with Jewish mysticism, the mission of Kabbalah is to explore Judaism's inner teachings. Above I explained that in the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, language is at the root of creation and writing is the cornerstone of Jewish cosmology. This understanding is significant for me with respect to my argument that circumcision, as 'word', is generative of the identity of Jewish male bodies. In what follows, we consider Kabbalistic approach to language. My purpose here is to demonstrate that this mystical exegetical tradition has themes that resonate with Derridean themes. Indeed, one contemporary Kabbalistic scholar, Elliot Wolfson, suggests that Kabbalah and Derrida share, in their respective views of the world, a belief that the materiality of being is textual¹⁸² (Wolfson 2002). Wolfson refers here to the centrality of language at the core of creation. As I go on to show, at the root of all things, are letters that are also divine emanations of God's being in the world. In other words: creation is textual, the world is text, and so, we are all embedded in language as a system of meaning. I want to highlight these similarities between Kabbalah and Derrida's approach in order to conceptualise writing as a system rather than mere inscriptions on page to complicate the Manichaean approach to violence. My effort here is to problematise our conventional understanding of circumcision as a form of violence, whether necessary or not.

To illustrate the linguistic nature of Kabbalah we turn to a series of essays by Gershom Scholem entitled 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala' parts one (1972a) and two (1972b). Here we need to remember that Kabbalah is concerned with questions relating both to the

¹⁸⁰ According to Jewish scholar Moshe Idel, 'one generally unnoticed fact is the huge quantity of Kabbalistic works. At present, there is no comprehensive bibliographical survey of this body of literature in its entirety. We are in complete darkness as to the number of the thousands of Kabbalistic works and fragments, most of which are still in manuscripts and a great number of which are anonymous or unidentified; furthermore, even a list of the names of the Kabbalists is still unavailable. Great efforts to peruse this literature were made by Scholem, who, from the 1930s, roamed tirelessly through the libraries of Europe to this end. On the basis of these efforts, he produced some important bibliographic studies; one of them, written in 1933, which deals with the genre of treatises devoted to the explanation of the scheme of ten Sefirot, alone comprised at the time 130 entries, most of them extant solely in manuscripts and most of them anonymous' (Idel 1988: 17).

¹⁸¹ In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* ([1941] 1995) the Kabbalistic scholar Gershom Scholem explains that Kabbalah is characterised by systematic investigation and interpretation (1995: 25). Kabbalah is a commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism that were mystical, even magical.

¹⁸² Recall Derrida's *corps-à-corps*, his *body to body*, where the body-text is at once *corpus* (text) and *corps* (body).

infinity of God and worldly existence by interpreting the Jewish holy text, the Torah. Language is a pivotal concept for Kabbalah insofar as it is the key to understanding the world and God. As I show further on, in Kabbalistic lore letters are the building blocks of creation. And so, the question of language is necessarily found at the heart of Judaism. In a recent book entitled *Jews and Words* (2012), Jewish novelist Amos Oz teams with his daughter, historian Fania Oz-Salzberg to write about the importance of words for Jews. They argue that Judaism's enduring texts compose the chain that connects the very first Jew – Abraham – and every other Jew to subsequent generations: 'Ours is not a bloodline but a textline', quip the authors (2012: 1). We might even go so far as to say that it ink runs through Jewish veins.

In 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala', Scholem writes about an unbreakable, lasting connection between the idea of the revealed truth and the notion of language. One might ask, what is so mystical about the notion of revealed truth? Here, the mystical element is not how the truth is being revealed, rather it is the content itself, which was previously unknown to and hidden from the reader until a 'mystically inspired author' (Dan 1988: 225) was able to penetrate the ancient text of the Torah and reveal the deep mystical truths hidden within. So for Kabbalah the meaning that a word contains is not restricted to what that word is, but is found in the hidden truth it reveals. For the Kabbalist, a reading entails reading the text and finding meaning in the spaces between the words. The meaning produced by words is never static as in every reading there is new interpretation, and another attempt to make meaning, to reveal the hidden truth. We see some resonance here with Derrida, who also understands writing and text in terms of not simply meaning-making, but also as a process of revealing hidden meaning in presence-absence.

We return to Scholem who argues that writing, commonly understood as secondary to speech, is in fact at the centre of the Kabbalistic scholar's interests (Scholem 1972b). This is because mystical truth may be revealed by reading the Torah: writing holds within itself the inner most esoteric secrets of creation and God. To this end, writing is never distinct from creation, itself a product of God's speech (Scholem 1972). I want to take a moment to consider the following quotation from Scholem as it illustrates the intimate correlation between writing and speech:

For the Kabbalist, of course, linguistic mysticism is at the same time a mysticism of writing. Every act of speaking is, in the world of the spirit, at once an act of writing, and every writing is potential speech, which is destined to become audible. The speaking party impresses, as it were, the three-dimensional space of the word into the Pneuma.¹⁸³ Writing, for the philologist, is no more than a secondary and

¹⁸³ Spirit.

extremely unmanageable image of real and effective speech; but for the Kabbalist it is the real centre of the mysteries of speech. The phonographic principle of a natural translation from speech into writing and, vice versa, from writing into speech operates in the Kabbalah under the conception that the holy letters of the alphabet are themselves those lineaments and signs, which the modern phonetician would be looking for on his record. The creative word of God is legitimately and distinctly marked precisely in these holy lines. Beyond the spoken word lies unspoken reflection. This is the pure thought, which is itself the process of thinking - one might say, the mute inner contemplation in which the nameless is lodged (Scholem 1972b: 167).

Scholem identifies a distinction between how a philologist might approach writing in contrast to a Kabbalistic approach. The philologist represents the classical, customary approach to writing and language, while the Kabbalistic approach takes on a mystical bent. While the philologist might be curious about a word and its origin, or perhaps, the historical context it was used in, the Kabbalist looks for what mystical truth that word might be hiding. And so while the former reads the word and traces its origin, the latter looks at the word, looks *through* it, reads it in an attempt to reveal its truth.

Textual Building Blocks

Letters are the textual building blocks of Jewish mysticism. Scholem writes: '[t]he letter is the element of cosmic writing. In the continuous act of the language of the creation the godhead is the only infinite speaker, but at the same time he is the original archetypal writer, who impresses his word deep into his created works' (Scholem 1972b: 168). Through the letter, this singular element needed to compose a word created the world. The word that is God - the archetypal writer - created the world.

My purpose here is to discuss these letters and how they were used in creation. I discuss the *Sefirot* (Heb. סְפִירוֹת)¹⁸⁴ which are the letters with which God is believed to have created the world. The *Sefirot* are the manifestations of God in creation (Scholem 1972: 70; Lancaster 2006: 14). They are the basic terms and concepts of the Kabbalah, understood as the inner wisdom of the Torah. Owing to its profound significance as a foundation of Jewish mysticism, a plethora of Kabbalistic texts is dedicated to elucidating the meaning of the Sefirot. Indeed, any Kabbalistic text must draw on them. To understand the complexity of Sefirot, it is imperative we first realise that the linguistic theory of the Kabbalah rests upon a combination of interpretations of the *Book of Yetzira*¹⁸⁵ (Heb. יְצִירָה) with

¹⁸⁴ The *Sefirot* are also known as the Ten Divine Emanations, Ten Divine Radiances, Ten Divine Eluminices, or Ten Divine Powers (see Scholem 1972b).

¹⁸⁵ *Yetzira* translates to 'creation', or 'making'. The *Sefer Yetzira* is one of the first manuscripts of Kabbalah, often attributed to the Biblical patriarch Abraham. The book is devoted to speculations concerning God's creation of the world. The book suggests that the Hebrew alphabet contains the basic elements or concepts needed for the 'creation of the universe' (bar-Lev 2003; Wasserstrom 2002).

the doctrine of the 'Name of the God'¹⁸⁶ as a basis of that language. This is done with Sefirot, which are basically 22 letters - the Hebrew alphabet - with which God is believed to have created the world (Lancaster 2006: 175).

The Sefirot are configurations or attributes of the Divine energies, which are themselves grounded in the world of the Sefirot. The world of the Sefirot is the world made up of the twenty-two letters with each one correlating to an aspect of creation.¹⁸⁷ Scholem explains: 'All creation, from the world of the highest angel to the lower realms of physical nature, refers symbolically to the law which operates within it - the law which governs in the world of the Sefirot' (Scholem and Pleasance 1972: 165). Additionally, the Sefirot correlate to parts of the human body, with *Yesod* (foundation) located in the place of the sex organ, and *Keter* (crown, the highest attainable mystical level) at the place of the head or mind. The interaction between the various *Sefirot* is depicted through a network of connecting *tzinorot* (Heb. צינורות Eng. channels), illustrating the flow of Divine energy throughout Creation. These connections suggest various subgrouping of the Sefirot and each reflects a common dynamic amongst the Sefirot they include. See below for an illustration of the Sefirot, the *tzinorot*, and their interaction, as well as their locations in the human body.

¹⁸⁶ God has many names, and each name is a different manner in which God can be experienced. Jewish law lists seven names of God that are not permitted to be erased due to their holiness.

¹⁸⁷ In Kabbalistic narrative, the opening chapter of Genesis reveals the sequence and nature of the Sefirot (see Lancaster 2006). That the *Sefirot* are present at the moment of Creation cements their ontological gravitas: through the *Sefirot* the world comes into being.

Image 5. The *Sefirot*

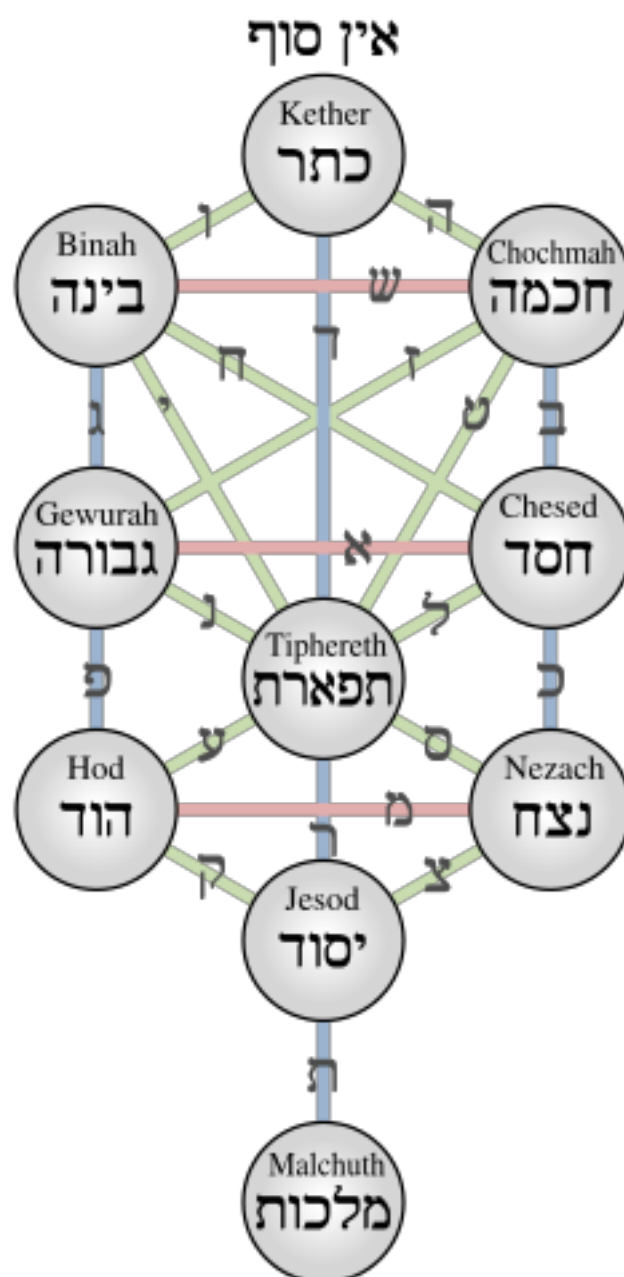
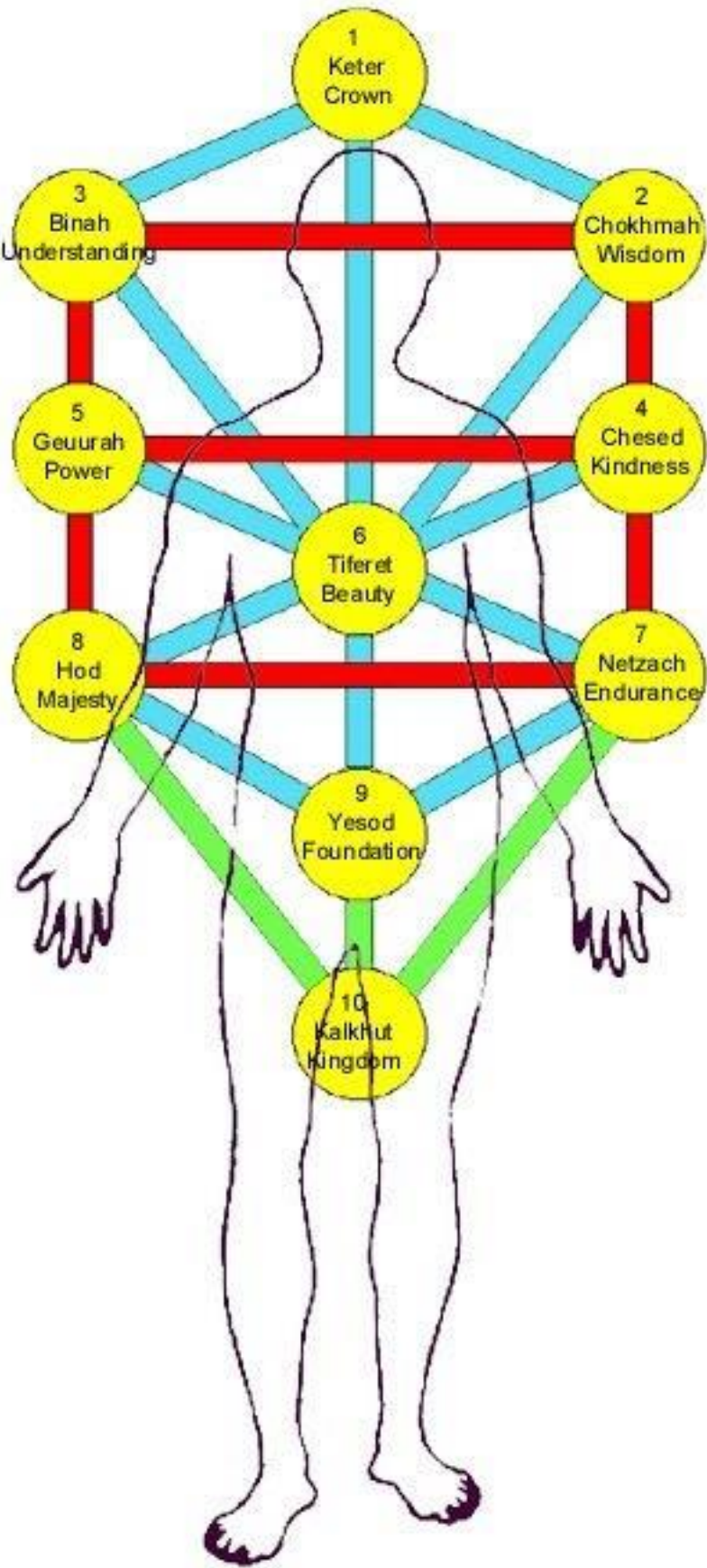


Image: 'Kabbalistic Tree of Life (Sephiroth)' by AnonMoos - Own work. Licensed under Public Domain via Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kabbalistic_Tree_of_Life_\(Sephiroth\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kabbalistic_Tree_of_Life_(Sephiroth)) Viewed 19 September 2015).

Image 6. The *Sefirot* and the body



According to Kabbalah, *Sefirot* aren't just a trope, they are the textual scaffolding of creation. As such, Jewish mystical thought conceptualises text as *generative, creative* elements, such that according to Kabbalah, the world is made up by letters. From a sociological perspective, I find this mystical notion of language fascinating: If writing is not separate from creation, therefore by definition, every worldly element is permeated with words and with language. We can say that text is lived and embodied. In the case of circumcision then, we can argue that body is text that is inscribed, marked in the flesh to make both the living body and the lived text. What might this understanding of the *livedness* of text mean for circumcision? To my mind, what it means is that to think of circumcision as intactivists and activists do, merely as a pathology, risks reducing the lived embodiment of the wor(l)d.

Another important detail I want to tease out from this discussion is that following Kabbalah, we could say textual meaning is derived not only from what is inscribed on the page, but also from what isn't. As the Kabbalistic reader searches for the hidden truth in text, every reading is also an interpretation. To this extent, every reading creates new meaning – it is not restricted to what the words on the page ostensibly signify. This has ramifications for my argument that circumcision can be understood as word because it shows us that there are many ways of reading word, *milah*, circumcision. And so my reading of the text of circumcision is one way, it stands alongside an intactivist's reading of circumcision, and an activist's reading. This is to acknowledge that we cannot find a single, 'right' way to conceptualise circumcision, but rather that we should give consideration to alternative interpretations.

Judaism and the question of authorship

So far, I have sought to establish a resonance between Derrida's notion of writing in general and the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah. My purpose now is to demonstrate the prominence of question of authorship in Judaism in relation to Derrida's deconstruction of authorship. Let's start with the most important text of Jewish scripture: the Bible, or Torah.

'Who wrote the Bible' is a complex and at times controversial question. The Bible tells the story of how the world began, but also offers a tale of how history unfolded, and outlines a moral code and instructions of how to practice faith and worship. We must also remember that the Torah outlines the fundamentals of Jewish law (recall that circumcision is a commandment from God); hence the question of Biblical authorship is simultaneously a question of authenticity and authority. Even to this day the Bible possesses immense power, not least because it has bearing on the current volatility of political landscapes. The Zionist claim to what is now the State of Israel, established in 1948, was

built on biblical symbols and premised on the notion that God had promised the land of Palestine – or Cna'an – to the Jews. In the process of establishing a Jewish State, hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish indigenous inhabitants of the land were displaced, and forced into an exile that echoes through today's political climate. Currently there are over 4 million Palestinian refugees in the Middle East (Masalha 2007), the kin of those exiled during the 1947-1948 Arab-Israeli war, also known as the Israeli War of Independence, or the Palestinian Nakbah ('catastrophe' in Arabic). For it is important to acknowledge that the question of authorship has a political bearing, too. While it might be easy to dismiss the bible as a story of myth and fiction, for others it is a living testament of divine promises and a true historical account that has (successfully) been invoked to justify war and displacement.

For some, the answer to the question 'who wrote the bible' is straightforward and based on religious belief. Indeed, for centuries, it was presumed that the Torah was a combination of divine revelation communicated directly from God as well as accurate history of events (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 10). Religious authorities accepted that the Biblical author is Moses, who, as is told in Deuteronomy, scribed the Torah just before his death.¹⁸⁸ For many others, the question of biblical authorship is an academic endeavour, a complex problem that calls for a critical response.¹⁸⁹ Contemporary scholars and historians of religion suggest that the Torah does not have a single author, and contend that its composition took place over centuries. This is known as the documentary hypothesis, a theory championed and propagated by Julius Wellhausen circa 1886. The documentary hypothesis argues that sections of the Bible were written by four separate sources, identified as J, E, D, and P over a length of time, and compiled by several editors (or redactors), known as R.¹⁹⁰ Despite its popularity, these days, the documentary hypothesis has faced challenge and criticism (see for example Noth 1981, 1972, 1966 and Rendtorff 1990, 1991, 2005). Even followers of the documentary hypothesis disagree on the exact attribution of authors to texts. We can see that the search for the biblical author is a field of investigation in its own right. Rather than

¹⁸⁸ There is discussion in the Talmud regarding the authorship of the Torah. The Talmud assigns all the Torah save for the last eight verses of Deuteronomy to Moses. These last eight verses describe the death of Moses. The Talmud credits those eight verses to Joshua, who is also noted as the author of the Book of Joshua, and says those eight verses are not technically part of the Torah.

¹⁸⁹ See Julius Wellhausen ([1886] 2003), Finkelstein and Silberman (2002), Daniel Boyarin (1997, 2003), Richard Elliott Friedman (1997), and William Schniedewind (2004).

¹⁹⁰ The German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen stands out as a powerful figure in the investigation into biblical authorship and the history of biblical scholarship in general (Friedman 1997: 25-26). His 1882 text *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* influenced the field of biblical scholarship to great extent and many of Wellhausen's claims are still held by many of his followers.

discuss this in detail, I want to focus on the key matter relevant to us, and that is the complexities of the search for an authorial source or origin, a matter that also concerns Derrida.

Derrida refers to the lack of determinable origin in text when he says: ‘The work... does not return – to the origin – to the same (Meme)... Going to the Other, coming from the same never to return to it, thus it comes only from the Other that invents it’ (Derrida 2007: 192). Again, Derrida displaces the author as originator of text and instead reinstates the reader as the one who participates in the meaning-making process. Derrida articulates the iterative continuous process of textual development: the transformation of the text with its readers and commentators. I want to tie this discussion to a final example from Jewish scholarship, the Talmud.

From speech to writing

The Torah was not always a written text. In fact, the Torah has two forms: the *Oral Torah* and the *Written Torah*. The spread of literacy was instrumental in the development of the *Written Torah*. Until it became possible to write down biblical stories, they were transmitted in form of oral stories to younger generations. The move from speech to writing raises some curious questions about the matter of authorship. For centuries, speech was the only method teachers could apply to transmit these wisdoms and instructions to their disciples. With time however, the need to put them in writing arose. There was only so much one could commit to memory, and the vast yet important quantity of oral material could not risk being lost. Thus, between the second and fifth centuries, the process of redacting the written law began: the oral law was compiled and written down in a document called the *Mishnah* (Steinsaltz 2006). Over the next few centuries in Jerusalem and Babylon, commentaries and elucidations elaborating on the *Mishnah* were committed to writing.¹⁹¹ These are known today as the *Gemarah*. The *Gemarah* and the *Mishnah* together are known as the Talmud, which is in itself a repository of centuries’ worth of Jewish thought, law and tradition. The process of collating knowledge to page was completed during the fifth century: this marked an important feat for preserving centuries of tradition, insight, and code. Thus we can think of the Torah as the cornerstone of Judaism, and of the Talmud as ‘the central pillar, soaring up from the foundations and supporting the entire spiritual and intellectual edifice’ (Steinsaltz 2006: 3).

The Talmud is a compilation of rabbinical commentaries on a vast collection of Jewish laws and traditions. Being an authority on Jewish law and custom, it is the most important post-biblical text

¹⁹¹ As it was written in two different geographical locations, there are two versions of the Talmud: the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud is more comprehensive and is the version most commonly used.

and includes annotations and elucidations by foundational Jewish scholars such as Rashi and Maimonides. Such contributions make up the Talmud as we know it today and provide insight into discussions around the compilation of Judaic law.¹⁹² It is not an easy text to read: there are often gaps in the reasoning where it is assumed that the reader already knows what the commentators are talking about, and concepts are often expressed in a sort of shorthand. The Talmud preserves a variety of views on every issue, with several annotations on each page. To gain a better understanding of how this is executed, let's take a look at a Talmudic page (see image 7).

The layout of a Talmud page

Running down the centre of the page is the text of the *Talmud*, the *Gemarah*, which is written in a combination of Hebrew and Aramaic. The inner text running alongside the page is a running commentary from Rashi, arguably the greatest religious commentator on the Bible and the corpus of Talmudic law. On the outer page we see the *Tosafot* (English: additions or supplements), which were composed by numerous scholars throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The half-column on the top left is a cross-reference by Rabbi Mevorakh, which leads to main codes of Jewish law including Maimonides' aforementioned *Mishne Torah*.

The half-row at the left bottom of the page entails further commentaries on the Talmud by various rabbinical scholars. Different versions are printed with varying tractates. On the bottom right of the page there is a half row that curves down. These are additional short glosses by comparatively recent rabbis, dating back to the sixteenth century through to the nineteenth century.

¹⁹² The status of the Talmud in Judaism is such that it is held in high regard. This means that many Jews dedicate time each day to pore over the arcane Talmudic scripture to debate, learn, and further articulate their customs with the teachings of the great rabbis. This is also because the text is so dense and convoluted that one is unlikely to grasp the deep spiritual meaning in each page without giving it a close reading. This practice of reading - called *Daf Yomi* (English. Daily Page) - was initially proposed at the First World Congress of the World Agudath Israel in Vienna in 1923 by Rabbi Meir Shapiro. The purpose of this was to unite Jews globally by bringing them together with a daily meditation of studying one single page. The first cycle of *Daf Yomi* began on the first day of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) 5684 (11 September, 1923). The 13th cycle of *Daf Yomi* commenced on August 3, 2012. It takes approximately seven and a half years to complete the Talmud in its entirety, all 2,711 pages of it, if reading a page a day. Insofar as every page of the Talmud includes an interpretation and discussion of the text, and considering the dedication required to read it - illustrated by the introduction of the *Daf Yomi* practice - it is logical to suggest that the practice of reading these archaic Jewish texts is not divorced from interpretation. Further to this point, the practice of *Daf Yomi* expresses another pivotal characteristic of Judaism - the importance of community and shared experience. Daily, observant Jews worldwide study the same page of the Talmud. This daily observance maintains cohesion and ensures similarity through consistent practice.

It is interesting to note that the formatting of the Talmud shares more than a passing resemblance with the layout of Derrida's *Glas* (1986).¹⁹³

¹⁹³ Much has been said about the columns in *Glas*. Gayatri Spivak writes that the pillars of text can be seen as architectural elements, which also resonate with the body's 'design': 'As the father's phallus works in the mother's hymen, between two legs, so Glas works at origins, between two columns, between Hegel and Genet' (Spivak 1977: 33). Comparatively, Steven Shakespeare argues that the columns illustrate the unveiling of the Torah scrolls, described in *Glas*: 'the twin columns of the scrolls become an image of the text of *Glas* itself, which divides the page between a reading of Hegel and a reading of Jean Genet' (Shakespeare 1998: 245). The layout of *Glas*: two parallel texts side by side, possesses more than an arbitrary resonance with the *Talmud*. Spivak and Shakespeare's differing interpretations of Derrida's text resonate with the Jewish scholars' varying annotations of Talmudic tractates.

Image 7. Page of the Talmud

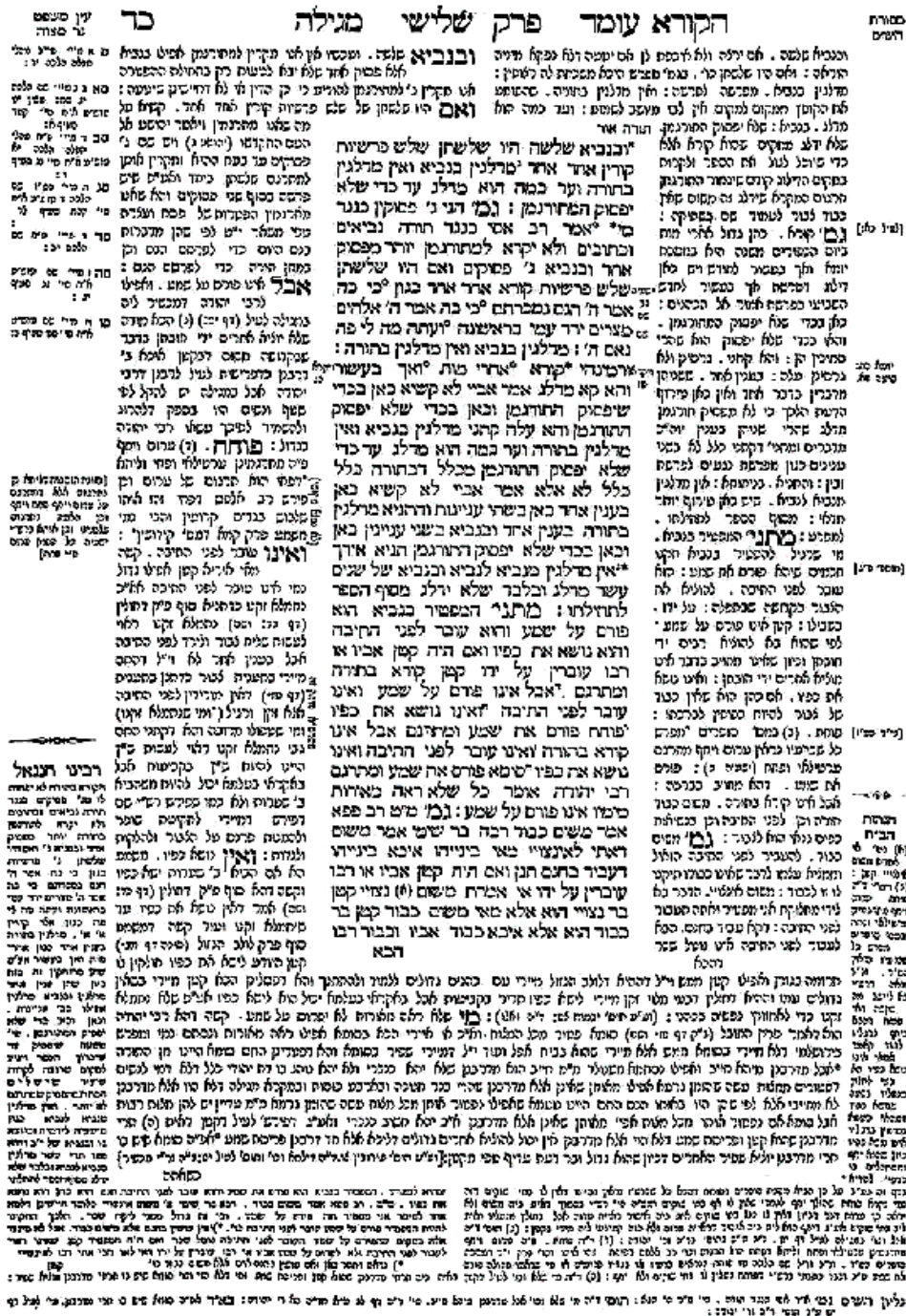


Image sourced from Eliezer Segal, University of Calgary, A Page from the Babylonian Talmud (<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/TalmudPage.html> viewed 25 September 2012).

To be sure, the reason Talmudic discourse is relevant here is because it demands and demands the continuous reading and rereading of texts. There is a sense that the Talmudic tradition problematises the concept of author as origin, and we can literally see this on the page where boxes of text are built on one another like scaffolding. Even as we look at the page, we remain unsure of

where the text ends and begins. Again, we see evidence of decentralising and dispossessing authorial origin. The significance of the Talmud is found in the synthesis and discussions of its authors and its layers of exegesis. There is no singular author of the Talmud: it is a collaboration of commentaries with each responding to each other, building on one another.¹⁹⁴ We can appreciate the process of building these layers and layers of text: authors go back and respond with their own words and customs to the works of their predecessors, such that a joint endeavour of layered exegesis that goes on to shape Jewish life emerges again and again. Imagine, if you will, ink pulsating through a complex circulatory system made up of letters, words, sentences weaving in and out of each other, intertwining across decades, centuries, all of which can be traced back to the beating heart of Judaism – the *Torah*. Mindful of the continuous emendations by a plurality of scholars, one could say that the Talmud is in a sense a missing act. The text is constantly being (re)read and (re)written, insofar as it is a compilation of responses and readings. These narratives are ones that are continuously recreated vis-à-vis processes of interpretation and re-writing. We might even say that Talmudic reading and deconstruction share similar concerns: meaning is found in absence and text, and text is a living organism.

With respect to circumcision, why is the question of authorship so important? By observing the theme of authorship in Derrida's work and in Judaic scholarship we might realise that the answer to this question is not clear-cut. If we return to our stakeholders, intactivists and activists, it is clear that each side tries to appeal to the child's parents by claiming that they have an obligation to the child to either circumcise him or not circumcise him. In one sense, this is a reflection of the Manichaean framework, which perceives violence – here circumcision – as an external intervention (either positive or negative). We might think of the parent-child relationship as an extension of conventional views of author-text such that the author is the originator of the text and responsible for it. Now, I set out to problematise this framework by exploring whether we might take another approach the question of authorship. Here, the works of Derrida and Judaic scholarship illustrated how we might develop a theoretical narrative that does not rely on direct authorial ownership. Insofar as we have successfully displaced the author as originator of text (circumcision, violence, cut, word), we can see that that the process of writing (circumcision) is generative and produces many different authors. To me, this disrupts the terms of Manichaean violence which relies on opposition and the idea of an

¹⁹⁴ In terms of content, the Talmud outlines the rules for Kosher Jewish life. From agricultural laws, dealing with Sabbath and festivals, marriage, divorce, contracts, and finances to ethics, sacrifices, and ritual purity and impurity, to name a few. These are all broken down to sub-categories, which contain robust discussions of the biblical origins of these rules and their significance and execution.

external force or agent. It helps to recast our understanding of the violence of circumcision as something generative.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to establish a link between circumcision and writing. My aim is to show that circumcision can be thought of as generative, as a form of writing that entwines identity and creation. To recap, I argued that that Derrida's understanding of 'writing in general' allows us to argue that circumcision is a writing on the body, and next, I considered Derrida's *Circumfession* (1993) to order to subvert a notion of an originary author. This idea helped me to challenge the idea of an external agent (indeed author) who exercises violence, a central tenet of Manichaean violence. I developed these ideas in relation to the tradition of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah in order to establish a connection with Derrida's conception of 'writing in general' and the Jewish scholarly tradition of writing as a generative, creative force. The next chapter develops the theme of writing more closely with circumcision in order to make the argument that the scission of circumcision in fact unites, brings together, makes whole.

Chapter 5. From Rite to Write

The wound is the place where the Light enters you — Rumi

In Judaic canon circumcision is a precept and covenant. I want to suggest that *milah* (circumcision-word) is also a state of being and a process of becoming. Circumcision is a state because one is either circumcised or he is not, and if he is - he carries on him a permanent sign that cannot be effaced, a sign that shows he belongs not only with his people - Jews - but also with God.¹⁹⁵ Circumcision is also a process of becoming as witnessed by the generation after generation of Jewish men bent in obeisance, hands folded in supplication, as *mohels* (traditional circumcisers) crouch over newborns - their hands full of intention and their mouth filled with prayer. Jewish male history is a tapestry of textual bodies woven together with the thread of *milah* - circumcision. Circumcision is also a process in that life itself is process - continuous, alive, and lived. We are ever changing, ever growing, ever learning. If we think of life as process, then we could say there is a *livedness* to identity. Heartbeat, breath, blood, belonging, and time all measured in the beating of one's heart, the world pulsating through veins. These are all elements that locate one in the here and now, all the life that we experience in - through - bodies. To this end circumcision too is alive - it's not only *on* or *in* body but it is part of body. Or to be more blunt, *it is body*. It is this embodied experience that I refer to when I speak of the *livedness* of circumcision.

But what happens if we accept - as indeed I proposed earlier and continue here to do - that circumcision is not *just* a cut (in the pathological sense) but also a writing of *milah* (word) on the body? This means that bodies are textual in the full meaning of the word. Such bodies are not stagnant, they are ever changing, and in a sense, *text* too is also dynamic insofar as its meaning changes with every reader. The Russian American author Vladimir Nabokov said 'one cannot read a book: one can only reread it' (1980). It is as if, in order to appreciate a text, we must do so out of the linearity of time, for we follow all those who have read it previously.

In this concluding chapter, I want to suggest that we think of Jewish ritual of circumcision as writing and that we think of *milah* as a state of being. By this, I mean that this text is alive, written, read, and

¹⁹⁵ So essential is the Jewish commandment of circumcision that those who do not observe it are punished by *Karet* - they are 'cut off' from their community.

thus - lived. By *lived* I mean to highlight the way that *milah* is *embodied* and the sense that text and meaning are alive – generative. We might think that text is a word, but equally, we must realise that a word does not exist in isolation from others – they are read and reread, they are embodied, carried in flesh, and constitute a continuous process of meaning-making. This text must be both process and state.

So far, I have argued that the lived experience of the cut is central to understanding Jewish ritual circumcision. In this concluding chapter, I seek to extend this understanding of the *livedness of circumcision* to the debate between activists and intactivists. My aim is to offer a new approach to debating circumcision, one that requires us to rethink the violence of circumcision in terms of presence rather than absence. This displaces our conventional approach to violence as a necessarily external and imposing force and conceives of violence as also *generative*. To make this argument I propose that circumcision in general should be examined in relation to other examples of generative violence in Jewish scripture.

In the first part of this chapter, I make the case that we should substitute the word ‘cut’ for circumcision because it offers an alternative to the always already moralised language of circumcision in contemporary debate. Next, I turn to Kabbalistic exegesis in order to elaborate the links between writing, creation, and violence so as to illustrate how the idea of the ‘cut’ is inherently generative, and unites rather than divides. Finally, we return to Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession* where I distinguish three distinct modes of circumcision: as covenant, as cut, and as word. This distinction helps me to argue that the cut of circumcision is a *making whole*. To this extent, we can concede that circumcision is certainly violent. At the same time, we can understand that this violence is *generative*, is *productive*, and is linked with the creation of bodies in general, of Jewish men in particular and the Jewish community as a whole. I seek to argue that the cut is *both* violent *and* generative, moral *and* immoral – it is neither one nor the other. This argument enables me to *problematise* intactivist and activist perceptions of circumcision as either/or, that is - *either* a moral imperative *or* profoundly immoral. My conclusion to the dissertation will offer some final remarks on the morality of the cut.

A conceptual alternative: the cut

What are some problems presented by the word ‘circumcision’? First, the language of ‘circumcision’ is emotionally fraught. When we speak of circumcision, we immediately speak of

infants restrained on tables, sharp tools breaking skin, ripping and tearing at neonatal flesh, a baby's cry, blood soaked gauze. It is difficult to imagine such a scene without conjuring an emotional reaction. In particular for those who disagree with circumcision, the name carries with it powerful negative associations. Indeed, 'circumcision' is associated with *infringement*: on body, on autonomy, on choice, on rights. The language of circumcision is tied in with *dismembering*. Not only is the foreskin severed from penis, but from the perspective of Jewish ritual circumcision, the neonate is removed from his mother: he is no longer part of her, insofar as he is no longer marked by her blood, but rather enters the primordial covenant and the lineage of Jewish men. For many, circumcision is associated with fragmentation, with violence, and mutilation¹⁹⁶ as well as a desire for reparation.¹⁹⁷ I imagine that for activists and intactivists, when one says the word 'circumcision' one can already hear the arguments for and against forming in their mind.¹⁹⁸ In short, circumcision is already part of a strained discourse on rights, violence and morality.¹⁹⁹

In order to avoid these difficulties, I wish to propose the language of the 'cut' as an alternative to circumcision. This concept is attractive because it avoids the constitutive language of mutilation, dismembering, infringement and violence that circumcision carries with it. Let us start with the definition of 'cut' found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Here, the word 'cut' is variously defined as to make incision in or into; to 'penetrate with an edged instrument which severs the continuity of the substance; to wound or injure with a sharp-edged instrument; to make incision in; to gash, slash' (cut, v. OED Online 2016). A cut is thus defined as that which removes, incises, severs, comes between, wounds, separates, or divides. Ostensibly, to cut implies that there is a pre-cut surface to wound, to cut through. Generally, a cut is what incises. It is seen as a symbol of violence due to its

¹⁹⁶ One need only turn to the plethora of online forums, support groups, and blogs to see evidence of men who have been deeply scarred by their circumcision. See for example Men Do Complain (<http://www.mendocomplain.com/>), Stop Genital Mutilations (<http://stop.genitalmutilation.org/>), and Circumcision Regret Stories (<http://circregretstories.blogspot.com.au/>). These are all websites dedicated to and written by men who speak out about their circumcision. See also Watson (2014).

¹⁹⁷ The burgeoning foreskin restoration movement is further indication of the great (often painful) lengths men go to correct their circumcision. See for example The National Organization of Restoring Men (NORM) (<http://www.norm.org/index.html>) and Jim Bigelow's *The Joy of Uncircumcising!* (1995).

¹⁹⁸ As I have previously shown, intactivists commonly juxtapose circumcision with mutilation (Hellsten 2004; Hodges 1997). Indeed, one intactivist writes that '[a]ll men circumcised in infancy have been traumatized, but it is difficult to convince adult men of this fact' (Reiss 2004: 202). If we were to drive this argument to its logical conclusion, it could be possible to suggest that any man who has undergone neonatal circumcision is essentially mutilated, whether he feels that way or not. While it is not my intention to belittle or question any of the men who feel that their circumcision is indeed mutilation, I note there are many circumcised men who do not consider their circumcision abnormal. It is not for me, or for intactivists, to proscribe to men whether they have been mutilated or not. Rather, I think it is useful – emotionally, theoretically, and practically – to untangle mutilation from violence and to think of circumcision from a position that does not already presuppose a determined moral paradigm, such as the one conveyed by the word 'mutilation'.

visceral connotations of battle, struggle, or a fight. A cut is to make an opening, but it is also to exclude, and remove. A cut thus symbolises pain, but also transformation, and change. The rhetoric of the cut is thus one of change, yet it is also wound, lacerating, a mark.²⁰⁰ The cut is a becoming.

I use 'becoming' deliberately to indicate a continuous process of transformation and change: this reflects the powerful linkage between circumcision and being, as they are both process and state. Thus it is not only the body that is malleable and not fixed; the cut too is associated with processes of adaptation, and of change. It is only possible for us to think of 'cut' in this way if we accept that there is *life* in the wound: that it is *alive, generative*. Think for instance of a wound that is severed flesh. At any given time it is brimming with bacteria, blood cells attempting to coagulate the wound. A cut is indeed a living space. Even a scar carries with it the *trace* of the wound. It is not devoid of life, or even purpose. A cut is not passive. It is full with life.

But, and this is a crucial but, a cut also (re)shapes, (re)forms, and (re)defines. In other words, a cut is a double gesture: an incision, yes, but a formative one: it is the opening of a wound that reveals to us the living tissue that connects life. A cut often redefines the surface it is in. Consider the following: when one traces an incised surface with a finger the wound of the cut can be felt. It becomes part of the body's topography. To this end, the cut can create new meaning – it becomes *part of the body*, connective tissue rather than divisive.

If we think of circumcision as a cut that does not merely sever, but connects then one of the elements of the cut is its *double gesture*. It at once incises and unfolds; it is simultaneously an opening and a closing. What does thinking of circumcision in this way offer us? Firstly, it enables us to think of circumcision in other than oppositional terms. In other words, circumcision is a cut that both incises and unites, opens and closes. It allows us to move away from thinking of circumcision in *either* positive/moral or negative/immoral terms, and lays out the conditions of possibility for both states to exist at once. That is, the concept of the cut that at once removes (immoral, negative)

²⁰⁰ There are numerous ways in which the cut has been treated in social theory and sociology: from the cut of plastic surgery and body modification (see for example Brush 1998), or the cut as a ritualistic, ceremonial element (Róheim 1945), to the 'cut' of female genital modification (see for example Kirby 1987; Abusharaf 2001; Schmeer 2004; Bell 2005; Coffman and Prazak 2007; Ntarangwi 2007; Hernlund and Shell-Duncan 2007; Einstein 2008; Khaja et al. 2009; Smith 2011; Wade 2011; Mains 2012; Svoboda 2012). Theorists like Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Karmen MacKendrick (2004) consider the notion of 'cut' in terms of 'inscription' or a marking, and its connotations with flesh. In *Word Made Skin* MacKendrick notes 'the palimpsestic quality of inscription (a pretentious way of saying that no surface, whether page or body, is really blank)' (MacKendrick 2004: 138). In these terms, the cut as inscription, as wound and as scar, tells a story on the flesh.

and unites (moral, positive) helps us challenge the mechanism of Manichaeism opposition, which is present in contemporary debates on circumcision.

For activists the cut is corrective. In the intactivist approach, the pre-cut surface (body) is thought to be integral, whole. Thus the cut severs, violates. But what of this sense of ‘wholeness’ that I keep referring to? What does it mean? One answer is that the ‘whole’ consists in the prevailing narrative in circumcision discourse that the body as an integral and whole being which is disrupted by circumcision. But this argument relies on a conception of the body as a ‘blank slate’ which relies on an idea of the body’s ‘natural’ state. These ideas reinforce a notion of protecting the body from harm, injury, and damage. Consequently, effects of violence are seen as alteration of nature, destruction, and loss. Violence is seen as a destructive force, infringing on, or intervening onto a pre-violated body, space, or thing. I want to ask if it is possible to challenge the idea that violence is an external gesture that cuts through a previously ‘whole’ or ‘integral’ body and wonder what if we think of the cut as a measure that is integral to a person’s process of *becoming*?

Let us consider this view of circumcision as an *external violation on an already whole or intact body*. This conception of circumcision necessarily enlists us into a narrative of ‘violence’ and ‘victim’, where one can seemingly *choose* to enact violence or not. I wish to disrupt the common notion of ‘choice’ when it comes to enacting the violence of circumcision as such and to do so, I turn to Nietzsche who has convincingly demonstrated that this language of choice is deceptive. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* ([1887] 2007), Nietzsche traces the historical evolution of concepts such as good, evil, guilt, conscience, responsibility, law and justice.²⁰¹ Of particular relevance to us though, following from my response to the Manichaeism framework, is his discussion on ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Throughout the text, Nietzsche complicates an oppositional relationship between good and evil, and critiques our received notions of what is ‘good’. Tracing the origin of ‘good’ to mean ‘noble’ Nietzsche argues: ‘[t]he hypothesis about the descent of the value judgment ‘good’ is historically untenable’ (2007: 12).²⁰² I wish to focus on the parable of the lamb and bird of prey from the first essay of the *Genealogy*, entitled: “‘Good and Evil’, ‘Good and Bad’”. It is a short parable, so I reproduce it in full:

²⁰¹ Nietzsche argues that meaning is historical, yet it is impossible to get to the ‘root’ or ‘origin’ of meaning since there is no historical origin.

²⁰² There is a whole socio-political element to Nietzsche’s discussion specifically regarding Jews and Aryans, as in *On the Genealogy of Morality* he develops his myth of the Aryan (Figueira 2002; Bonfiglio 2006). Some have argued that Nietzsche in fact opposed the precursors of the Third Reich (see for instance Santaniello 1994, 2002; Golomb 2002).

There is nothing strange about the fact that lambs bear a grudge towards large birds of prey: but that is no reason to blame the large birds of prey for carrying off the little lambs. And if the lambs say to each other, 'These birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey and most like its opposite, a lamb, – is good, isn't he?', then there is no reason to raise objections to this setting-up of an ideal beyond the fact that the birds of prey will view it somewhat derisively, and will perhaps say: 'We don't bear any grudge at all towards these good lambs, in fact we love them, nothing is tastier than a tender lamb.' – It is just as absurd to ask strength not to express itself as strength, not to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master, to be a thirst for enemies, resistance and triumphs, as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength. A quantum of force is just such a quantum of drive, will, action, in fact it is nothing but this driving, willing and acting, and only the seduction of language (and the fundamental errors of reason petrified within it), which construes and misconstrues all actions as conditional upon an agency, a 'subject', can make it appear otherwise (Nietzsche 2007: 25-26).

In this analogy, Nietzsche complicates the dichotomy of good and evil as opposing elements. It might seem to us that birds of prey are evil, as they prey on little lambs and carry them away to feast on. Similarly, we might consider the little lambs resting at the foot of their mother to be good. But it is this very insistence that we can blame the birds of prey for being evil and venerate the lambs for being good that Nietzsche takes issue with. It is not the case that we can say: those birds of prey are evil, and their opposition – the lambs – are good, and so whomever resembles the birds of prey is evil and whomever is not a bird of prey is good. For what choice does the bird of prey have if not to be a bird of prey? And what choice does the little lamb have if not to be a little lamb? To this end, might we *really* say that birds of prey are evil, and lambs good? Indeed as Nietzsche writes: 'it is just as absurd to ask strength *not* to express itself as strength, *not* to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master...as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength' (2007: 26). Nietzsche complicates the notion that what we perceive to be good or evil behaviour is in fact a choice and suggests that it is our belief in choice that engenders hatred and conflict (2007: 126).

Nietzsche continues: 'And just as the common people separates lightning from its flash and takes the latter to be a *deed*, something performed by a subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the *freedom* to manifest strength or not' (2007: 26). Here, Nietzsche critiques the tendency of (in his words) 'common people' to find cause and effect in elements in a way that is arbitrary and misleading. In attributing 'cause' and 'effect', or in other words seeking the 'being' or 'thing' that is behind a deed, we attribute our own value judgments to it and in so doing, delimit the nature of the deed. This deed can have no other qualities – it must be 'evil'. In Nietzsche's words: 'But there is no such substratum; there is no 'being' behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it' (1994: 26). In other words, Nietzsche challenges the perception that 'good' is opposite to 'evil', and that they do not converge. Furthermore, Nietzsche challenges the

notion that there is an ‘external actor’ who acts: ‘the doer’ is invented as an after- thought’, Nietzsche argues, ‘the doing is everything’ (1994: 26). And so, Nietzsche’s treatment of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ effectively removes ‘act’ from ‘doer’. That is, Nietzsche challenges the idea that there is an intrinsic connection between ‘doer’ and action. The bird of prey cannot help going after little lambs (in Nietzsche’s parable, the hunger for lambs intersects not with bloodlust, but with love: ‘We [the birds of prey] don’t bear any grudge at all towards these good lambs, in fact we love them, nothing is tastier than a tender lamb’). Nietzsche critiques the position that ‘*the strong are free* to be weak, and the birds of prey are free to be lambs ... birds of prey [are] *responsible* for being birds of prey’ (emphasis in original 1994: 26) and argues that in essence, they do not have a choice.

Nietzsche is important for my argument as he offers a notion of the cut that is freed from the ‘doer’ so to speak. This is of significance as it allows me to complicate an idea espoused by intactivists and activists – that circumcision originates with the parents, meaning that parents are ‘authors’ and ‘source’ of circumcision. In addition, Nietzsche also allows me to see the cut as an expression of force whose meaning is historically constructed.

For Nietzsche, the words ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are constructions that reflect the superior power of force to claim their meaning; they reflect a transvaluation of the former relation between ‘noble and good’, ‘plebian and bad’ along with the creation of a subject who seemingly can ‘choose’ and therefore take responsibility for her or his actions. Nietzsche argues that the ‘seduction of language’ (2007: 26) has given rise to an inappropriate emphasis on *doers* rather than on the *deed*. For Nietzsche, it is absurd and unnatural to ask power/strength to not express itself through strength (2007: 27). As absurd as it is to ask the bird of prey to choose not to eat a lamb, it is absurd to demand that masters turn from their nature and be slaves. It is in their nature to dominate, to be masters. This manifests itself in that the slaves ‘exploit’ this belief regarding the agency of the doer for their own ends, thus they ardently hold the position that ‘the strong man is free to be weak and the bird of prey to be a lamb’ (2007: 26).

So far, I have attempted to complicate the commitment to good and bad as being on opposite sides of the moral spectrum, and to disrupt the common notion of ‘choice’ when it comes to enacting the violence of circumcision as such. Now, it is not my intention to suggest that actions are necessarily empty of choice and intent, but rather to disturb the idea that violence is *always* a choice, *always* opposed to the moral and the good. One of the consequences of thinking of circumcision as a generative cut is that we can be open to the idea that it isn’t *just* a choice, but rather *produces* the very terms of debate it is embedded in.

Infinite to finite: Creation and fracture

I have argued that we should substitute the word ‘cut’ for circumcision because it offers an alternative to the always already moralised terms of the contemporary circumcision debate. The ‘cut’, I suggested, can be seen as *connecting* as well as *incising*. I am particularly interested in the manifestation of Jewish ritual circumcision as a cut with all that this entails: a severing, a removing, an excision, that is also an opening, and a bringing together. In what follows I show that Kabbalah already has in place a narrative in which *cut* can be seen as bringing forth the *whole*. I take this discussion of violence, cut and circumcision to its logical conclusion and argue that the cut via circumcision is a measure that is integral to the process of becoming, in that it is linked to identity and selfhood.

In the section that follows I rely primarily on the Danish theorist Inge Birgitte Siegumfeldt and her reading of the Kabbalistic tale of the *Primordial Tzimtzum* (tzimtzum translates to contraction). The tale shows writing and creation reveal to be deeply intertwined such that God’s signature reveals itself in the most curious of places: on the place of circumcision. A brief word on Siegumfeldt is helpful. In general terms, she is concerned with the figure of circumcision in Derridean thought, and with Derrida’s relation to Judaism through the lens of deconstruction – as affiliation without affiliation. In ‘Secrets and Sacrifices of Scission’ (2005) Siegumfeldt divulges her primary reason for placing circumcision as a central theme in her work on Derrida, a reason readers of this thesis will be familiar with: Derrida’s circumfessional statement ‘Circumcision, that’s all I’ve ever talked about’ (Derrida 1993: 70). For Siegumfeldt, this statement touches not only on circumcision, a concept that surfaced in some of Derrida’s later work, but also ‘can be traced through the entire body of his writing as a kind of subtext’ (Siegumfeldt 2005: 283). Circumcision works as a kind of deconstruction – an excision that is at once an incision, a cut that incises while marking the Jewish covenant.

Circumcision as God’s Signature

In ‘The Double Movement of Creation: Vignettes of Kabbalistic and Deconstructive Thought’ (2007), which is the focus of my discussion, Siegumfeldt explores the juxtaposition of deconstruction with themes of severance and alliance, fracturing and writing, and circumcision in Kabbalistic exegesis. Siegumfeldt opens her text by recounting that according to Kabbalistic exegesis, the Creation of the world was put into motion with the act of God inscribing or sealing the first letter of his name into the primordial void. This letter, *yud*, is the smallest in the Jewish alphabet but the most powerful, as it holds God’s entire creative force and, as I go on to show,

‘contains and institutes fracture’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 247). Siegumfeldt recalls that other monumental event in Jewish history that is marked by a seal – a cut that is God’s covenant with Abraham. In Jewish mysticism, the cut of circumcision is identified with the first letter of God’s name, the one imbued with creative force. Thus the cut of circumcision is ‘identified with the divine initial but also seen as symbolically re-enacting the inscription of God’s name’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 247). So we have the inscription of God’s name not only in creation, but also reiterated in the body of the Jewish male. With regards to Jewish cosmogony, God’s signature thus entails a breakage in the primordial void, thus creation is linked with fracture. With respect to circumcision, God’s signature marks a covenant, an alliance signed with the severing of the foreskin. ‘In both cases’, Siegumfeldt writes with reference to the *yud* of circumcision and Creation, ‘we have a double movement of formation and rupture’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 247). These themes of formation and rupture, or creation and division, resonate in the works of Jacques Derrida for whom ‘the inscription of the writer’s name and the signing by initials have increasingly been associated with circumcision as a double movement of alliance and division’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 247-248). With these similarities in mind, Siegumfeldt goes on to explore whether the ‘intellectual currency of deconstruction’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 248) and rabbinic exegesis might plausibly come together with respect to themes of alliance and division, inscription and signature, circumcision and creation. In Siegumfeldt’s words, her ensuing discussion ‘centres on the notion of creation as an act of naming, sealing, or signing, and seeks to present the authorial signature as a moment of rapture in which kabbalistic notions of creation, the covenant of circumcision, and deconstructive theory converge’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 248).

I focus on a particular vignette from Siegumfeldt’s text ‘The Double Movement of Creation: Vignettes of Kabbalistic and Deconstructive Thought’ (2007). My treatment recounts the Kabbalistic story about creation as conveyed by Siegumfeldt, verbatim from her text. The text allows me to mobilise the concepts of text, cut, circumcision, and creation in order to conduct a deconstructive reading of ‘authorship’. From here, I draw on Gershom Scholem for additional support in my analysis of the Kabbalistic tale and introduce several key figures in Kabbalah. My purpose here is to bring to light the inherent complexities of ‘authorship’ and ‘source’ by way of challenging the idea that parents are the ultimate ‘source’ of circumcision. My discussion is intended to echo Nietzsche’s critique of the doer behind the deed as much as it seeks to subvert the sense in which there is an intact originary body prior to circumcision. Subsequently I return to Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession* to demonstrate the double gesture of circumcision (alliance and

division) and to distinguish three distinct modes of circumcision: as covenant, as cut, and as word. This distinction helps me to argue that the cut of circumcision is a *making whole*. It will serve to conclude my attempt to reframe the contemporary activist and intactivist debate.

The Primordial Cut

In ‘The Double Movement of Creation: Vignettes of Kabbalistic and Deconstructive Thought’ (2007), Siegumfeldt recounts a Kabbalistic anecdote which occurs at the beginning of all things, and, to an extent, even before the beginning: it is an account of God’s actions before creation of the world (a turn of events outlined in the Biblical story of Genesis). An emergent theme in this story is the intersection of God as ‘creator’ and ‘author’. Because of this textual play of ‘author/creator’ and ‘text’, I want to focus on Siegumfeldt’s narration of the story as well as the story itself. As I go on to show, the story encapsulates some of the running themes of ‘authorship’ and ‘text’ as they relate to Creation. Moreover, it reveals curious insights that we can develop in relation to contemporary debates on circumcision. Here is Siegumfeldt’s presentation of the Kabbalistic tale in full:

The story is this:

One day, the infinite God (the Ein-Sof, literally ‘without-end’) was in a creative mood and in order to clear a space in which to play, he held his breath, thus vacating a domain within his infinite being. Now faced with a finite blank space, the Ein-Sof did what most of us do when sitting before a clean sheet of paper: he wrote his name. Or rather, he signed his initials in flaming letters in the void. We all know the Tetragrammaton, transliterated from the Hebrew יהוה Yud-Heh-Wav-Heh into the Roman YHWH. As the first of these letters, which is also the smallest, Yud, entered the void, the entire alphabet emerged. The signs came together in a particular constellation and formed the first vessel: Adam Kadmon (literally ‘first blood’ or ‘first earth’). A fine and entirely flawless creation – so much so, in fact, that it could not hold its own perfection: it burst, shattered into pieces, and fell. The letters of the alphabet, however, worked their fire magic again and welded the fragments together to form another vessel – imperfect, this time, for it was chipped, much like a cracked piece of porcelain glued back together and which never regains its fine distinctive ring. This, the second vessel, is where creation as we know it from Genesis began: the chaotic abyss, windswept, without form, or void. Or, as perceived later in the Gospel of John: ‘When all things began, the Word already was’ (in the translation of the New English Bible) (Siegumfeldt 2007: 249).

This is the story of God’s actions prior to the creation of the world described in Genesis. For our purposes, the description of God as *writing the world into being* by the power of his signature is of importance. As we see in this Kabbalistic tale, the effect of God signing his name in flaming letters is that the entire alphabet and consequently creation itself are called into being: ‘The signs came together in a particular constellation and formed the first vessel: Adam Kadmon’, Siegumfeldt writes. We learn that this perfect vessel was not able to sustain itself, and so it shattered, leading to the creation of the second vessel. The second vessel, imperfect as it was, culminated in the creation of the world as described in Genesis.

We are prompted to ask: How did it come to be that an infinite (*Ein-Sof*) entity, which was the only thing that existed, would become disrupted and begin the process of creation that we know from Genesis? Lurianic Kabbalah offers us an explanation.²⁰³ Lurianic Kabbalah calls the process through which the dynamic of creation arose ‘*Tzimzum*’ (Heb. צמצום Eng. Contraction). The process of *contraction*, or *tzimzum* is Isaac Luria’s explanation for how the world came to be, that is: how it was possible for something that *isn’t* the *Ein-Sof* (infinite) to exist. This is quite a curious point for it suggests that in order to make room for the world, God had to contract himself, his own being. In other words, it is not only that the finite came from the infinite (*Ein-Sof*), but also that God had to contract his immanence and infinite being in order to make room for creation. I turn to Gershom Scholem to further elucidate this point:

The starting point of this theory is the idea that the very essence of Ein-Sof leaves no space whatsoever for creation, for it is impossible to imagine an area which is not already God, since this would constitute a limitation of infinity. [...] Consequently, an act of creation is possible only through “the entry of God Himself”, that is, through an act of *tzimzum*, whereby He contracts himself and so makes it possible for something which is not Ein-Sof to exist (Scholem 1974: 129).

Luria’s response to the predicament of ‘how was it possible for something that *isn’t* the *Ein-Sof* (infinite) to exist’ (since the *infinite* leaves no room for creation), is fascinating. Through *tzimzum* (contracting) God contracted himself ‘so that the smaller might contain the larger’ (Scholem 1974: 129). Thus the infinite could be contained in a finite space, and leave room for other things. Here, we are not so concerned here with capturing the revision of every detail of kabbalistic cosmogony as tempting as it may be. It is sufficient for us to note that it was God’s signature that set creation in motion, an event that happened when God inscribed the letters of his name on the primordial void, leading to the events following *tzimzum*. Let’s return to Siegunfeldt’s story where she recounts what happens next:

Now faced with a finite blank space, the Ein-Sof did what most of us do when sitting before a clean sheet of paper: he wrote his name. Or rather, he signed his initials in flaming letters in the void. We all know the Tetragrammaton, transliterated from the Hebrew יהוה Yud-Heh-Wav-Heh into the Roman

²⁰³ Moshe Cordovero and Isaac Luria are two main figures in Kabbalah. Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522-70) was a key figure in the historical development of Kabbalah and a teacher of Isaac Luria (Ben-Shlomo in Scholem 1974: 401). Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534 – 1572), widely known as *ha-Ari* (the Lion), is one of the central figures of Kabbalah. Luria’s teachings were so significant and popular they became the foundation of developments in Jewish mysticism. Even though Luria did not write down his teachings, they became the ‘principal legacy of the kabbalistic revival of the time’ (Lancaster 2006: 98). One of Luria’s students, Rabbi Chaim Vital, had ‘won the laurels’ as Luria’s chief disciple and as the main scribe of Luria’s teachings (Scholem 1974: 423). Of Luria’s influence Scholem writes: ‘in the whole history of Kabbalah only the influence of the Zohar can measure up to his’ (Scholem 1974: 74). Scholem is referring here to the Kabbalistic text of *The Zohar*, written circa 1280, which is the most important, indeed, fundamental, work of Kabbalah. Authorship of *The Zohar* is disputed, with some attributing it to Moses b. Shem To de Leon (see for example Scholem 1974: 57), and others to the second century Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (see for example Lancaster 2006: 231).

YHVH. As the first of these letters, which is also the smallest, Yud, entered the void, the entire alphabet emerged. The signs came together in a particular constellation and formed the first vessel: Adam Kadmon (Siegumfeldt 2007: 249).

Siegumfeldt demonstrates that this narration emphasises that ‘creation was first linguistic’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 250). Now, this is also true of the creation story outlined in Genesis, where it is told: ‘God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light’ (Genesis 1: 3). We see then that language is at the root of all creation. Not only does the power of God’s divine utterance but the letters themselves, in writing, hold the power of creation. Scholem explains that ‘the alphabet is the original source of language and at the same time the original source of being’ (Scholem 1972: 75).

Back to our story: once *tzimzum*, or contraction, has taken place, a vessel is formed. This vessel is the creation of God, but it is also *differentiated from God* following the process of *tzimzum*. It is how the infinite was able to create something *other than* infinite. This vessel is God’s first creation, *Adam Kadmon*, who Siegumfeldt translates as ‘first blood’ or ‘first earth’ but is more commonly translated as ‘Primordial Man/Adam’ (alluding here to the subsequent Adam who makes his appearance in Genesis). Adam Kadmon was thus the archetypal form of all creation. As Siegumfeldt describes it, Adam Kadmon ‘could not hold its own perfection: it burst, shattered into pieces, and fell’.²⁰⁴ Following this event the letters of the alphabet re-establish the vessel.²⁰⁵ What we see here is curious: the perfect, intact vessel did not, and indeed, *could not* survive whole. Instead, there was a *need* for a fracture, a breakage, or in other word – a cut, to cut through and disrupt the vessel shattering its *intactness*. We might go as far as to say that creation lends itself to fracture.

Siegumfeldt describes the moment of breaking as follows: ‘A fine and entirely flawless creation – so much so, in fact, that it could not hold its own perfection: it burst, shattered into pieces, and fell’. I think Siegumfeldt’s narrative can be usefully supplemented with Scholem’s since he explains the breaking of the vessels in further detail, which is helpful for me to further explicate the convergence of *cut* and *creation*. Of the moment of breakage Scholem writes:

At this point, however, there occurred what is known in Lurianic Kabbalah as “the breaking of the vessels” or “the death of the kings.” The vessels assigned to the upper three Sefirot managed to contain the light that flowed into them, but the light struck the six Sefirot from Hesed to Yesod all at once and

²⁰⁴ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the profound mystical meaning of the breaking of the vessel. If the reader would like to explore this discussion further, I recommend Gershom Scholem’s *Kabbalah* (1974), in particular the reader might find the following sections useful: ‘The breaking of the vessels’ (1974: 135) and ‘Tikkun’ (1974: 140).

²⁰⁵ In Lurianic Kabbalah, this is known as *Tikkun* (Heb. תיקון Eng. Correction, rectification), which refers to the correction of the world as well as the vessel.

so was too strong to be held by the individual vessels; one after another they broke, the pieces shattering and falling. [...] Nothing, neither the lights nor the vessels, remained in its proper place, and this development – called after a phrase borrowed from the Idrot of the Zohar, “the death of the primeval kings” – was nothing less than a cosmic catastrophe (Scholem 1974: 138-139).

For our purposes, the additional detail of the breaking vessels offered in Scholem’s account is significant. The breaking of the vessels causes a dramatic shift: from being to death, and then again to life (the life in the Genesis account of Creation). The ‘cosmic catastrophe’ that was the catalyst for the world’s existence contains a multitude of elements: Life and death, nothingness and being, infinite and finite, God and Other (non-God). But also, and this is the crucial point, this creation was only possible because of a fracture, a cut if you will, that disrupted the intact vessel which could not itself exist in its intactness and could not be contained as a ‘whole’. It was necessary for the cut to take place order for creation to emerge in a state where it could survive. Thus the fracture that *cut* Adam Kadmon, and in fact the essence of fragmentation and cutting itself, was vital for the subsequent act of creation to take place. I want to emphasise this point because it allows us to see how the cut is intimately linked with creation.

This discussion helps us to appreciate a first point: the cut is always already conducive of creation, for it is only by incision, disruption, fragmentation, that being comes unto itself. Thus according to Kabbalistic cosmogony letter and cut helped bring the world into being. And yet, the story is not quite as straightforward as this. When I first read Siegumfeldt’s story, it struck me how useful it would be to illustrate resonant themes in my work. However, I experienced an unexpected obstacle - I couldn't find a reference to the story. I searched in vain throughout Siegumfeldt’s paper for a reference to this narrative so that I might consult the original version. But curiously, Siegumfeldt does not cite any part of her story, she makes no mention of where and in what text we can find this narrative of creation, nor does she include a footnote explaining that the story is rooted in Lurianic narrative and not, say, a narrative of Moshe Cordovero. From what I can discern, Siegumfeldt’s account of this particular kabbalistic lore is presented with her own words and phrasing. But I found it curious that she does not indicate where this account is originally given, and by whom. I spent a couple of days searching for this kabbalistic story in other sources, to try to supplement Siegumfeldt’s version, and despite varied and multiple search queries, my attempts came up empty handed.²⁰⁶ Some long and wasted hours later, I was disgruntled, and confused. Why hadn’t

²⁰⁶ I must confess to venturing on a brief yet painstaking attempt to struggle through *The Zohar* (the chief work of Kabbalah). Unfortunately my Aramaic (to the extent that I know some words in Aramaic, following from its closeness to Hebrew) is rather poor, so this attempt bore no fruit.

Siegumfeldt mentioned the source or sources of this version of Kabbalistic cosmogony, even in passing?

Should we discount the absence of an explicit source or reference as a harmless oversight? Is it possible that Siegumfeldt was working with the assumption that any reader encountering her text would have some fundamental knowledge of Kabbalah so as to know that the story of creation through contraction (*tzimtzum*) is Lurianic? On reflection, neither seems quite right to me. I think that the decision to omit a reference and source is a (conscious or not) gesture by Siegumfeldt to complicate the role of ‘author’. Let me explain what I mean. It is important to remember that Siegumfeldt explores the alignment of deconstruction and kabbalistic modes. Given her commitments to these modes of exegesis, the matters of authorship and writing underlie her paper. Next, we might also recall that kabbalistic tradition is one of exegesis and exploration. Secret knowledge is sought through the combination of text and mysticism. Both kabbalah and deconstruction playfully reimagine the roles of text and writing as generative forces.

Further on, Siegumfeldt clarifies. ‘Of course, my account here is highly reductive’, she writes, ‘and will in no way do justice to the profoundly complex and elaborate theosophical speculation of the kabbalistic sages (Isaac the Blind, Isaac Luria, Moshe Cordovero, and many others). Moreover, it is taken entirely out of its context as a tripartite dialectical process of divine manifestation’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 250). Siegumfeldt’s story, by her own account, was thus simplified and taken from a broader context. These observations are important for a number of reasons. First, the effect of Siegumfeldt’s decision to simplify complex and robust Kabbalistic lore is the creation of a new narrative, one that is so unique in its presentation that a search for its roots will inevitably present a challenge to anyone uninitiated in Kabbalistic theosophy and cosmogony. Second, the form in which Siegumfeldt presents this story can be seen to challenge the academic custom of authorial attribution.

Consider the following: instead of saying something along the lines of ‘the story of creation I am about to recount has roots in Lurianic kabbalah/articulated in a specific text/espoused by Cordovero/and so on’, Siegumfeldt simply says: ‘While resting largely on the ancient body of mystical speculation, the story of creation that I am about to tell emerged from this climate of

dispersal and uprootedness²⁰⁷ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 249). Phrased this way, we can appreciate that Siegumfeldt herself participates in a certain ‘dispersal and uprootedness’ with her creation story, composed as it is from various kabbalistic narratives, and situated – without reference to source or origin – in a paper on the alignment of deconstruction and kabbalah. Siegumfeldt – in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion – not only demonstrates ‘uprootedness’, but also plays with the customary notion of authorship, where one *can* attribute text because there is a singular author-creator. This is not the case in Kabbalah, and deconstruction provides the thematic tools to engage in this playful dispersal and displacement. Presented without source or origin, and not explicitly anchored in any text, we can get the sense of a story that is the stuff of mystical folklore. But it’s more than that precisely because it appears, in other iterations, in the works of the Kabbalist sage Isaac Luria. It seems to me that Siegumfeldt’s decision to present the story severed from any textual roots is a gesture that exposes the complex nature of authorship. There is no authorial attribution because as a story of creation, the story did not, in fact, originate with Luria or any other of the kabbalistic sages. It is a narrative of *creation*, and as such, the ‘author’, God, is always already implied. Siegumfeldt’s violation of customary authorial attribution is thus a double gesture: she at once challenges the notion of authorship and returns authorship to God.

But why is this discussion of authorship so important? First, because it essentially relates to authority and meaning-making and second, because we can identify in it some of the tensions of current circumcision arguments. Let me explain. What if we supplement ‘author’ for ‘agency’ or ‘autonomy’? Here, I use ‘author’ as ‘originator’ or ‘instigator’ of text, the person who produces and has control over her or his text, and ‘agency’ or ‘autonomy’ in the liberal sense – ideals that mean that an autonomous person should have control over her or his own life. While this latter point is espoused by intactivists, activists argue that the child is still the responsibility of the parent. But this tension between ‘who can author circumcision’ (for intactivists – it is the child once he grows up, and for activists – it is the parents) reflects much of the tension in Siegumfeldt’s negation of conventional authorial form. In other words, it isn’t that there is one answer to who is author (parent or child, and Siegumfeldt, Luria, Cordovero, or God) because fundamentally ‘authorship’ is something *we do* when reading, when attributing something with meaning. To read a text is to create it in that moment in time. Both intactivists and activists claim that their view of

²⁰⁷ Siegumfeldt is referring here to the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal. This resulted in many kabbalists ruminating on the notion of exile ‘in terms of a human condition that was written into creation from the very beginning’ (Siegumfeldt 2007: 249).

agency/authorship (child or parent respectively) is the *right* way (and here we get into the matter of morality), when in effect it is possible that *both* are accurate. Yes, agency is a fundamental tenant of contemporary liberal society as is the notion that parents bear responsibility for their children. But here is my intervention: neither has considered that circumcision – as cut – as text – as writing – *in itself produces meaning*. And as Siegumfeldt has shown, in our attempts to identify a singular author we effectively *displace* the one thing that makes meaning: text.

My discussion of Siegumfeldt and the tale of *tzimtzum* is significant for several reasons. First, its themes resonate with some overall themes in this dissertation: text, generative violence, and cut. In bringing the Kabbalistic story of creation-before-creation, I wish show that Jewish cosmology hinges upon text: writing brought forth creation. We could also see how this primordial writing is entwined with violence as evidenced by the breaking of the vessels and resulting in a cosmic catastrophe that served as the catalyst for all creation. And what was it that enabled creation, what was it that divided the vessels but yet brought together the world? A break, a wound, a cut. Only through a cut can light enter the whole, only through fragmentation can one be brought into being, and if we take this statement to its ultimate conclusion, we could say that to in order to *be* one must first *be severed*. This is true of creation but also of the newborn gulping life into her lungs while expert hands cut at the umbilical cord, severing baby from mother but bringing baby into a life of her own. You see, there are ways in which cuts signal existence, and circumcision is just one of those ways.

We can immediately see how my discussion complicates activist and intactivist narratives: the cut – no longer embedded solely in the realm of pathology – creates inasmuch as it severs. I propose that the frameworks that intactivists and activists have in place to analyse circumcision, that show evidence of Manichaeian oppositions and a violence that is always external, overlook the *livedness* of circumcision. That is, the embodied existence of circumcision, its generative cut, its capacity to make meaning. My argument isn't relativist, rather I am concerned with putting forward another mechanism through which to conceptualise circumcision, one that disrupts conventional narratives.

If above we considered how creation takes place through cut and violence, I now want to continue to develop further links between circumcision and writing found in the Jewish canon. We turn first to a couple of tales from *Midrash Tanhuma*, after which we make our final return to Jacques Derrida's *Circumfession*.

Milah, circumcision and creation

Let us consider another story that comes from the *Midrash Tanhuma*,²⁰⁸ in which circumcision is discussed as being the seal of God's name not simply on the male member but on the whole body. This discussion ties in with my earlier argument regarding the embodiment of circumcision, as it shows how circumcision can be thought of in relation to the whole being.

Contemporary Kabbalistic scholar Elliot Wolfson explains: 'The correlation between circumcision and the divine name is first alluded to in the *Midrash Tanhuma*, where it is stated that God sealed his name *Shaddai* in the children of Israel' (Wolfson 1987: 77). The passage Wolfson refers to is in *Midrash Tanhuma*, Tzav, Ch.14, which I quote in full:

All circumcised Israelites will enter the Garden of Eden because the Holy One Blessed is He placed His Name upon Israel in order that they may enter the Garden of Eden. And what was the Name and the Seal that He placed upon them? It is ShaDaY (Almighty): He placed the [letter] Shin on the nose, the [letter] Dalet on the hand, and the [letter] Yud he placed on the [place of] circumcision. And therefore, when an Israelite 'goes to his world' [i.e. dies], there is an angel appointed in the Garden of Eden who takes every man of Israel that is circumcised and brings him into the Garden of Eden. And those who are not circumcised, even though they have two of the letters of the Name which is ShaDaY, for they have the Shin of the nose and the Dalet of the hand, but they don't have the Yud of ShaDaY, he is of the term 'SheD' (demon); meaning that a demon leads him to hell.

Circumcision, we learn from this story, is a condition of entry to heaven (*Garden of Eden*), but for a curious reason: circumcision is the seal of God's name, marked in place of the foreskin.

Interestingly, it is not only the male member that is marked with God's name, but rather the whole body that is the surface upon which God seals his name. To wit: 'And what was the Name and the Seal that He placed upon them? It is ShaDaY (Almighty): He placed the [letter] Shin [ש] on the nose, the [letter] Dalet [ד] on the hand, and the [letter] Yud [י] he placed on the [place of] circumcision'. The Hebrew letters *Shin-Dalet-Yud* (ש-ד-י) spell out one of God's holy names - *ShaDaY* (in Hebrew, where the spelling is left to right, it is spelt ידש). But not only that - they correlate with parts of the body: *Shin* (ש) can be found in the place of the nose and nostrils, while *Dalet* (ד) is found in arm and hand, and *Yud* (י) is found on the place upon which it is *written*, the place of the circumcision.²⁰⁹ This Midrashic story tells of the crossing of text and body, letter and flesh, divine and corporeal. Notice here that no measures need to be taken in order to 'write' Shin

²⁰⁸ Previously I explained that *Midrash* is a mode of rabbinic exegesis. This body of work is a collection of stories, discussions of specific laws, and rabbinic homilies. *Midrash Tanhuma* is named after a prolific commentator of the *Midrash*, Rabbi Tanhuma.

²⁰⁹ 'On the [place of] circumcision' refers not only to the penis, upon which the circumcision is cut, but also to circumcision itself. Thus the *yud* can be read as correlated with body part and cut.

and Dalet on the body: the nose and hand are physical, genetically passed on from one generation to the next. In fact, the *Yud* is the only letter of God's name that needs to be *written* on the body in order to be present. Thus the Jew is obliged to take that extra measure in revealing God's name in flesh. The Jew therefore functions as God's scribe, signing the letter that finalises the spelling of God's name on the body.

While *Shin*, *Dalet* and *Yud* spell out God's name (which can be read on nose, arm and circumcision), the name that we read without the *yud*, that is – without the circumcision – is much more sinister. Without the *yud* of circumcision, שד״י (ShaDaY) reads as שד (SheD), translated in English as 'demon'. It is important to note that *Yud* is also the first letter of the Tetragrammaton. It is thus the letter that begins the name of God and, as you will recall from the kabbalistic story recounted by Siegmundfeldt above: God began the process of creation by signing his name, YHWH. Thus *yud* is the first gesture of creation. Thus circumcision inscribes the divine name on the prepuce. It is the name and covenant of God sealed in the flesh: the 'sign of the writer inscribing his signature in the text' (Siegmundfeldt 2005: 290). To this end, I wish to argue that we could think of circumcision as a (w)rite of passage.

In the *Midrash Tanhuma* it is written that 'Circumcision is so precious to the Holy One...that He assured Abraham that no one who had been circumcised would descend unto Gehenna [hell]' (translation by Berman 1996: 107).²¹⁰ Not only did God assure Abraham that, all circumcised Israelites will not descend into hell in the afterlife, they are also promised entry into the Garden of Eden. This can only take place to the extent that the presence of circumcision can be *read* on the body, like a literal *password*. Sealed in the flesh are God's promises made during his alliance with Abraham, in Genesis 17. Contemporary Kabbalistic scholar Elliot Wolfson argues:²¹¹

The rite of circumcision legitimately functions as the everlasting covenant between God and the Jew, because the seal of circumcision, which is at the same time the seal by means of which God created heaven and earth, is the most sacred of God's names. Circumcision is therefore the inscription of the divine letter, and hence the divine name, upon the flesh of the Jew (Wolfson 1987: 112).

Here we see how circumcision is described as being God's signature, a sort of password to ensure entry into Heaven, and a seal of God's covenant with the Jew. Now of course, I do not intend to

²¹⁰ This translation is by Samuel A. Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: an English translation of Genesis and Exodus from the printed version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an introduction, notes and indexes* (1996), KTAV Publishing.

²¹¹ Wolfson is interested in gender representation in the Zohar and the bible. Naturally, circumcision lends itself to discussions on gender seeing as it is a procedure conducted on sex organs.

suggest that God *literally* inscribes his name into the body of every neonate male Jew. Rather, my intention here was to show the proliferation of circumcision-word juxtaposition in Jewish scholarship. My dissertation is another such contribution, albeit with a sociological focus on contemporary narratives of circumcision.

What I am getting at here is that God's divine writing and the writing on/of the body of an infant boy resonate with each other. If we think of the preputial cut as God's signature, what might this mean for those conducting the circumcision? We can reach back now to the opening pages of this dissertation where the rabbi conceded that yes, indeed, circumcision is mutilation. At this point, we have even more of a sense in which the cut of circumcision is violent. How do the arguments that circumcision is mutilation and circumcisers are mutilators, come to bear on an understanding that circumcision is God's signature? If the story of *tzimzum* has shown us anything it is that God creates through *fracture*, though *cut*, which is itself an opening and a closing. While the question of mutilation remains open, it does not necessarily deny the capacity of circumcision to be a meaningful act. Instead, we note how both can exist at the same time: violence and meaning, cut and word, God's signature and body.

All I've ever talked about

We make our final return to Jacques Derrida's circumcisional text, *Circumfession* (1993). Here I want to focus on a specific passage that reveals the intangible and permanent mark circumcision traced in Derrida's life:

Circumcision, that's all I've ever talked about, consider the discourse on the limit, margins, marks, marches, etc., the closure, the ring (alliances and gift), the sacrifice, the writing of the body, the pharmakos excluded or cut off, the cutting/sewing of Glas, the blow and the sewing back up, whence the hypothesis according to which it's that, circumcision, that, without knowing it, never talking about it or talking about it in passing, as though it were an example, that I was always speaking or having spoken, unless, another hypothesis, circumcision itself is merely an example of the thing I was talking about, yes but I have been, I am and always will be, me and not another, circumcised, and there's a region that is no longer that of an example, that's the one that interested me and tells me not how I am a case but whether I am no longer a case, when the word first of am, at least, CIRCUMCISED, across so many relays, multiplied by my 'culture', Latin, philosophy, etc., as it imprinted itself on my language circumcised in its turn, could not have not worked on me, pulling me backward, in all directions, to love, yes, a word, milah, loves another, the whole lexicon that obsesses my writings (emphasis in original, Derrida 1993: 70-72).

With Derrida's words in mind we can now clearly see how milah unites and separates. The cut unites the male body with Jewish community as a whole, simultaneously separating him from non-Jews (as well as from his own tissue). Circumcision is a *visible* mark and as such, it serves as an

identifier. Abrahamic monotheism, marked on the flesh, persists by being ‘handed down’ from generation to generation, as the Jewish man carries the sign of the covenant written in his flesh; a shared experience for Jewish men. This is one way the cut ensures the endurance of this religion. Clearly, one of the primary purposes of circumcision is to cut ‘God’s covenant into the male body partly to establish Abrahamic monotheism’ (Silverman 2004: 425). Recall also God’s threat that those who are not circumcised will be ‘cut off’ from this community: thus the cut of circumcision contributes to social and religious cohesion. Furthermore, seeing as circumcision is a cut that doubles as *milah*, we recognise how the double gesture of severing and uniting also endows body with meaning. We can think of circumcised Jewish bodies as *written*, in other words: as flesh that is given meaning through writing. This is an argument that is made ever more curious with the thought that this is flesh that also speaks, also writes. In other words, the language of circumcision is continuously reproduced: those who write circumcision (*milah*) are also those who read it and make meaning of it. They embody it.

While the corpus of Jewish canonical texts is occupied with the question of circumcision,²¹² and its significance for Jewish culture, for non-Jews, just as for Jews, circumcision can be thought of as writing and can be read. Indeed, this is possible if we are willing to follow Derrida’s concept of *writing in the general sense*. This is not to say that those who are not circumcised are not meaningful or that a *non-mark* lacks meaning. To the contrary: the non-mark of circumcision is also a text to be read, the meaning of which varies depending on who is doing the reading: for intactivists, the non-mark is one that signifies autonomy and wholeness. For activists, it entails the possibility of infection and disease.

The question of writing in regards to circumcision refers not only to substance and content, but also to surface, to body. In *Dissemination* (1981) Derrida writes: ‘The page is white but it has been written on from time immemorial; it is white through forgetfulness of what has been written, through erasure of the text on which everything that is written is written’ (Derrida 1981: 310). Here

²¹² The journey to research this thesis led me one day to a Judaica bookstore in a Sydney suburb. I was browsing the bookshelves for a significant length of time when the owner - an orthodox man, heavily bearded and cloaked in traditional black and white attire - inquired whether I needed assistance. ‘Yes’, I replied somewhat enthusiastically and desperately, as I had been scouring the shelves for nearly half an hour. ‘I’m looking for seminal Jewish texts on circumcision – *Brit Milah* – if you could show me the cornerstone texts and authors who write about this’. ‘On *Brit Milah*?’ the owner smiled and replied, extending his arm to take in all the heavily stocked shelves: ‘it’s all about *Brit Milah*’. In retrospect, I should have anticipated such an answer. Circumcision is not only a procedure but is a nexus of Jewish community and body. As we have seen, circumcision marks the beginning of a boy’s Jewish life and to that end – God’s covenant with Abraham, the first Jew – is embodied in every circumcision.

we can take Derrida's words to mean that every inscription, every writing, is written on a surface that has already known writing. Put simply, writing does not take place on *tabula rasa*. Every writing is thus an overwriting, an underwriting, even a rewriting.

Conclusion

In this chapter I drew out links between circumcision and creation. I showed how the concept of *cut* is traced through Judaic cosmology and exegesis. I proposed that circumcision is a physical marking that ratifies a body into the Judaic male lineage, making it legible and part of the Jewish Magnum Opus: the body is written in, through, and by history. We might think of circumcision as a process of writing of a person into a cultural, historical, and religious lineage. It is an act of incision, excision, and insertion. As such, the written body becomes part of cultural vocabulary: visible, responsible, and accessible. The body embodies this writing, this word, this *milah*, which is a cut that speaks and that can be read.

The argument that the body is circumcised by *milah* (word, doubling as circumcision) suggests that there is someone marking this *milah* on the body, an author. As such, there must also be a reader who collaborates with the text and with the textual body in order to produce the body in this textual fashion.²¹³ This collaborative process bridges the boundaries between reader and author, allowing for an exchange of roles on the interface of the body, the landscape of textual inscription.

Not only does Jewish society double as reader and author of the circumcised textual body, but *milah* (word) functions as the text of both author and reader. Thus not only is the body inscribed with word, but it is also inscribed into Jewish society, and this has social and ethical implications as in order for a male body to be a Jewish body, the body must undergo a (w)rite of passage:

The indissoluble link between the idea of the revealed truth and the notion of language - is as much, that is, as the word of God makes itself heard through the medium of human language, if, otherwise, human experience can reach the knowledge of such a word at all - is presumably one of the most important, if not the most important, legacies bequeathed by Judaism to the history of religions (Scholem 1972a: 60).

²¹³ It is no longer the case that author and reader have separate roles in textual analysis as we see in 'classical' literary criticism, the object of Barthes' critique. This is highlighted by Barthes' statement that 'textual analysis is founded on *reading* rather than on the objective structure of the text' (emphasis in original 1977: 131). The reader's role is to develop the text, 'completing it rather than giving it 'expression'' (Barthes 1977: 163).

My point is that Jewish identity is ongoing and does not 'begin anew' with every Jewish infant born, but is rather recreated through the regular and sustained circumcision of infant males. The circular circumference of circumcision stands for this circularity of history and cultural and individual identity.

Conclusion: The Cut that Makes Whole

Circumcision is to be thought in terms of the cut that severs the circle of the same, as the cut that opens the same to the other, which cuts a very different figure - Derrida (1996: 198)

My goal in this dissertation was to consider whether there was another way to conceptualise circumcision that thinks violence differently. My dissertation was dedicated to exploring this problem by analysing three elements: violence, secular approaches to circumcision, and Jewish ritual circumcision. Here, I wish to note that I'm cognisant of the difficulty of making concluding – or conclusive – statements. Indeed, the purpose of this dissertation was to interrogate a relationship between violence, morality, and circumcision by way of problematising divisions and the notion of externality. I set out to challenge the idea that there is only *one right way* to think of circumcision. To this end, a conventional 'conclusion' seems out of place. For if there is no *one right way* to conceptualise circumcision, then surely there is also no *one right way* to conclude whether circumcision is indeed moral or immoral - the primary concern underpinning our discussion. How does one conclude an argument that has no resolute answer in a way that doesn't just seem evasive? More specifically, how does a writer resolve her animating questions if she is no longer the singular origin of her work, as now you, dear reader, are an active participant in the production of meaning?²¹⁴ The simple answer is that there is no *one way* to conclude as there is no *one* conclusion: in what follows, I do my best to offer you one approach.

My point of entry in the dissertation was the matter of violence. I sought to respond to the intactivist position that circumcision is an immoral act of violence that violates a 'whole' or 'intact' body and that rendered the body fragmented, incomplete. Here it is important to recall that for activists, conversely, the decision to not circumcise is immoral as it compromises a basic moral principle – health. I suggested that there is a fault in both arguments, as each sees the body only *in one way*. For intactivists, the ideal 'whole' body is the body prior to circumcision, and for activists, the ideal 'healthy' body is the

²¹⁴ My discussion has left me to wonder: Does the reader bear any responsibility for how they interpret the text? In other words, might the positions of intactivists, who claim that all circumcision is mutilation, be a manifestation of an 'irresponsible reading' of those men for whom circumcision (whether consciously or not) is a mark of identity, of Judaism? In the same vein, might we think of activists who read circumcision solely in medical terms as reducing this rich text of circumcision to a single argument? My purpose in this dissertation was to demonstrate that there is always the potential for each text to have multiple readings: whether it is a reading conducted through the prism of autonomy or health, or my dissertation that seeks to complicate easy readings of the cut, and so it is just one reading, one of many.

circumcised body. But one of my purposes in this dissertation was to challenge the idea that there is one way for a body to be. I want to disrupt the idea that bodies that are in violation of an 'ideal' are considered 'mutilated' or conversely, somehow unhealthy. I proposed that both activist and intactivist approaches to circumcision rely on a dualistic system of morality and violence such that circumcision is an external intervention that either compromises or contributes to bodily integrity.

Throughout the dissertation I showed that familiar conceptions of violence – generally perceived in terms of an imposition or act of force imposed upon the self by an external other – typically display characteristics of causality, externality, and opposition (violator – violated and self – other). My discussion was premised on the argument that these notions of externality and opposition are inadequate to consider the moral complexities of Jewish ritual circumcision, and in response I wondered what might be needed for us to think of violence in a way that doesn't rely on externality and opposition. I set out to offer a nuanced view of circumcision as an expression of the *violence of ontology*, which is characterised by a violence that is related to existence, the violence of being. A *violence of ontology* is not necessarily a causal happening, and because it is related to existence, to being, it resists definition through binary oppositions. My intention here was to respond to dualistic positions on circumcision and wonder whether we can think of violence in a way that does not rely on an entrenched moral binary and externality. To establish what a violence of ontology might look like, I turned to Jacques Derrida whose method of deconstruction as a mode of critique whose terms lie within the object under investigation was a helpful thematic tool.

By adopting the terms of debate mobilised by activists and intactivists such as 'violence' and 'morality' I set out to conduct my own deconstruction of circumcision. I explored what *another kind of circumcised body* looks like, specifically: the Jewish male body. My intention here was to see whether we can so adamantly argue that circumcision is either bad or good, moral or immoral, and to the extent that moral guidelines shape individual actions – ethical or unethical.

I suggested that moving away from externality and opposition enables us to think of violence as a generative force, one that is tied in with our very being. I advanced this line of enquiry by way of interrogating how circumcision – practiced routinely by Jews – can be deemed violent yet permissible, even necessary. I now want to turn to a recent Israeli court case that allows me to demonstrate my analysis in this dissertation, which considered the complexities of the circumcision debate and the different secular and religious moral language.

In 2013, a divorce case occupied Israeli news headlines. The parents going through the divorce had previously decided against circumcising their son, but with divorce proceedings underway, the father had a change of heart. He wanted to have his son circumcised, and submitted his case to the Rabbinic Court (Ahituv 2013: Online).²¹⁵ The Rabbinic Court is part of Israel's two-tier judicial system (secular and religious courts) where religious tribunals have legal jurisdiction over the marriages and divorces of the country's Jewish citizens. Divorces are handled exclusively by Rabbinic Courts. As a rule, matters incidental to divorces (such as child custody) are handled by the secular Family Courts, however in this particular case the Rabbinic Court made the curious decision to accept and adjudicate the father's case even though it was outside their jurisdiction.

On October 29, 2013 the Rabbinical Court handed down their ruling, which obligated the mother to have her son circumcised within a week. In addition, the Court set a 500 NIS (USD \$140) fine for each day the mother delayed getting her son circumcised (Ahituv 2013: Online). The Associated Press published the following comments made by Shimon Yaakovi, rabbi, lawyer and legal adviser to the Rabbinical Court:

The [court's] decision is not based only on religious law. It is for the welfare of a Jewish child in Israel not to be different from his peers in this matter. The mother should not be allowed to ignore the irreversible psychological damage that may be caused due to the child's exceptionality and difference from the children around him. This will not be allowed! (Quoted in AP 2013: Online).

I want to remark here on the curious logic offered by Yaakovi. While we might assume that a religious court would indeed base its decision on religion, the Rabbinic Court did not only rely on a 'religious' logic (so, the logic of the Abrahamic covenant, God's commandment) but rather it invoked a secular logic articulated in terms of 'welfare': it is in the best welfare of the child to be circumcised so that he won't differ from other boys. I wish to propose that Yaakovi's comment reflects a 'secular version' of the Jewish trump (community-oriented, morality attributed to God): circumcision is seen as an essential ritual in order to maintain a sense of *sameness and* community. Indeed, this is the logic of *unity though the cut* that – as I repeatedly argued – underpins the Jewish circumcision rite.

²¹⁵ The intactivist movement is growing in Israel. In lieu of a circumcision ceremony, Jewish parents who choose not to circumcise can instead hold *Brit Shalom* (Hebrew for Covenant of Peace). The *Brit Shalom* movement is global and is becoming increasingly popular among Jewish parents who choose not to circumcise their sons. It is an alternative non-cutting naming ceremony for newborn Jewish boys (Brit Shalom: online). On the popularity of the *Brit Shalom* movement, filmmaker Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon, who directed the film *Cut*, says: 'Calling it a marginal phenomenon would be generous' (quoted in Lowenfeld 2011: Online).

In essence the court case, which entails a conflict between pro- and anti-circumcision positions with a specific focus on the Jewish rite, reveals the complexities of my argument: that is, the friction between secular and religious approaches to circumcision. With respect to the court case, it is important to note that each side was convinced they had the best welfare of the child in mind, a sentiment that extends to both sides of the overall pro- anti-circumcision debate.

While my dissertation is not concerned with determining which side (religious or secular) is right, it is worth seeing how this particular court case was resolved. The mother refused to adhere to the Rabbinic Court ruling and took her case to the High Court of Justice (a secular institution). In late June of 2014, the High Court of Justice voted 6-1 that the Rabbinical Court had exceeded its authority by ordering the woman to circumcise her son in response to her husband's demand in divorce proceedings, and voided the ruling (Hovel 2014: Online). Curiously, as the Jerusalem Post reported, Deputy Supreme Court President Miriam Naor (one of the six judges who ruled against the Rabbinic Court) noted 'the monumental significance of circumcision in Jewish culture, being virtually universally observed by secular Jews along with religious Jews, and that Jews over the centuries had given their lives to defend their right to circumcise' (Sharon and Bob 2014: Online). I find this point very interesting: that the High Court resolved the case *on a legal technicality*,²¹⁶ while *recognising* the significance of circumcision in Jewish life.²¹⁷

The court case in question exemplifies various discussions held throughout this dissertation, namely: the complexity of coming to a determined moral decision on circumcision, the intrinsic connection between circumcision and identity, the tension and clash of views between opponents and proponents of circumcision, and that circumcision is a broad community issue, as well as an individual one. Naor's invocation of Jewish heritage, and the fact that the High Court ruling was only possible because the Rabbinic Court did not have authority to adjudicate on circumcision leads us to wonder if the High Court's decision would have turned out differently had the Rabbinic Court not overstepped its legal boundaries. But even more pertinently, this case shows us the exigency of discussions on circumcision as we are reminded that lives hang in the balance, and that for some, the whole world dangles at the

²¹⁶ The 'technicality' being that the Rabbinic Court did not have authority on this matter because the issue of circumcision does not fall under the heading of 'divorce', which is in the Rabbinic Courts' jurisdiction.

²¹⁷ Yaakovi's response to the mother's petition to the High Court of Justice also emphasises the importance of circumcision in Jewish life: 'the woman's right to freedom from religion cannot come at the expense of the child, whose right, as a Jew in Israel, is to be circumcised. The best interest of the child and his right to be circumcised as all Jews cannot be sacrificed on the altar of the petitioner's right to freedom of religion' and further, 'it is inconceivable that the matter of circumcision will be taken away from great Jewish Sages, and be left to the judgment of a civil court' (quoted in Nahshoni 2014: Online).

edge of a foreskin, so to speak: circumcision is the cut that divides opinion, infringes on bodies, inscribes an indelible word on the body, and is the thread that has woven the tapestry of centuries of Jewish life. It is the cut that makes whole.

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