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ABSTRACT: The re- of 'restrain' — not the more common iterative 're-' but a mere, if semantically obscure intensifier — marks a temporal paradox: the restraint that prevents a force from reaching its *telos* is not only a delay, but the intervention of a separate, autonomous, and anti-teleological regime of time. The article reads the biblical figure of the *katéchon*, 'the withholder', as an expression of this paradox and as symptomatic of a political-theological ambivalence essential to the foundation of Western political thought. If the 'secular order' or 'worldly government' has the function of withholding both the ultimate salvation and the final outbreak of chaos, then it sustains itself only by postponing any determination of its value or effect.

Restrain

CHRISTIANE FREY

The ‘re-’word this article examines is the verb ‘to restrain’ — and the nouns derived from it: ‘the restrainer’ and ‘the restraint’. The word stems from the Latin *restringere* and means, first and foremost, ‘to hold back’, ‘to withhold’; it can also mean to ‘bind back’, to ‘put in chains’ or figuratively to ‘put in limits’ or simply ‘to limit’. Interestingly enough, the Latin *restringere* can also mean to ‘reveal’ or ‘to lay bare’ — for example, a sword (*ferrum*) or one’s own hand (*manum*).¹

What is the particular function of the ‘re-’ in this word? Since both *stringere* and *restringere* denote the action of ‘binding’, one can indeed pose the question what exactly

1 See the entries on ‘restringere’ in Gerhard Köbler, *Lateinisches Abkunfts- und Wirkungswörterbuch*, 2nd edn (2009) <<http://www.koeblergerhard.de/Latein/LateinischesWB.pdf>> [accessed 20 December 2018], p. 1103; Hermann Menge, *Langenscheidts Großwörterbuch Latein*, 2 vols (Berlin: Langenscheidt, 2001), II: *Lateinisch-deutsch, unter Berücksichtigung der Etymologie*, p. 809. — I cannot withhold my gratitude for sustained critique and comments from my co-fellows at the ICI Berlin, as well as from Christoph Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer.

the prefix 're-' here contributes. For very obviously, it does not connote a repetition or a restitution — this is not an iterative 're-'. An act of *restringere* does not *stringere* something *again*, nor does it take it *back* to its original status. Rather, the 're-' must be functioning as an intensifier, adding emphasis to the meaning already expressed in the base, *stringere*. Like many Latin prefixes, such as 'ad-', 'ex-', or 'cum-', 're-' can have the function of an aspect marker, signifying 'thoroughness'. 'Resplendent', for example, means not to shine (*splendere*) again or to shine back, but to shine brightly. Similarly, 'to restrain' would thus mean to bind, but to do so thoroughly or fully: perhaps with great intensity, force, or effect.

This way of parsing the word, however, does not yet tell the whole story. The intensifying 're-', here, does not merely strengthen the root meaning while leaving it unchanged; rather, it carries additional connotations, connotations that add to or even alter the meaning of the base. For the intensification of the *stringere* in *restringere* must say something about the *object* of this act of binding. If what is being bound is something that must be *restrained*, *restrictum*, rather than simply *strictum* or bound, then there must be something about it that *calls for* the intensification of the binding signified by the 're-'. If *stringere* points to the simple act of 'tying' or 'binding', *restringere* would refer, in addition, to the restraint of something that would otherwise, were it not restrained, be in flow, in movement, that is: ongoing. 'To restrain' implies that something that would otherwise continue to perform or execute its force, or move in whatever direction it presses toward, has been arrested. Put differently, the 're-' of *restringere* only makes sense in reference to a force that is being countered, a force that continues to exert itself even if, or even when, it is

being prevented from achieving its aim. If there were no force, action, or movement at the outset, there could be no restraint. And one could go still further: the movement or action that is being arrested must be such that it could, potentially, succeed in overcoming the restraining force. If the force being restrained were weak, or of inconsistent direction, the act of restraining would be superfluous. In every restraint, then, there are two forces at work: one that aims, obviously, at continuing its course, or, to say the least, aims at *not* being arrested; and one that arrests, one that suspends — even if intermittently or provisionally — an action or motion. The very ‘re-’ in ‘restrain’ implies by necessity two different dynamics, or two opposed forces.

The ‘re-’ of the re-strainer thus points to a temporal paradox. The very expression ‘to re-strain’ necessarily implies *two* times: one, a time that flows forward, and another that arrests, slows or interrupts this forward-flowing time. It thus entails a time and a countertime, a time of flow and a time of halting. The result of the action of *restringere* is a pause, a halting of motion that would otherwise have been relentless. Evidently, the restrainer can therefore only be understood as an anti-teleological figure. The *telos* that is negatively implied in the concept of *restringere* — the *telos* of the movement that has been arrested — is not achieved or at least not yet achieved; it is, on the contrary, prevented, for an indefinite period of time. Now, how are we to understand the time of the restraint? Is it a mere *delay* in the movement that has been arrested — and thus of essentially the same nature as the time that would have been marked out by the movement it prevents? Any chronological description of the process of restraint would force us to see it this way: a (potential) movement has been restrained; just as this movement would have covered a certain distance in

a certain span of time, so the delay occupies a span of time, of the very same time in which the movement's progress toward its *telos* could have been measured. In fact, however, if the time of the restraint is of *indefinite* duration, and this is the common sense of 'restrain', then the time of the restraint would seem to be of an entirely different nature than the time of what is being restrained. A restraint is more than a simple delay, a postponement in one and the same time as that occupied by what it postpones. Rather, a restraint interrupts not just a movement but the very time of that movement, in order to institute another kind of time: the indefinite, non-teleological, open-ended time of the restraint. The restraint does not just arrest a movement, but suspends the very time of that movement and imposes its own, essentially different regime of time. Since its duration is indeterminate (the act of restraining could stop after a few seconds or go on for ages), the act of restraining, in other words, gains a certain autarchy.

Of course, in the history of (theo-political) culture, there is a particular concept or figure that points precisely to this 'double-bound' movement: the notorious *katéchon*. The main reference for the many and varied interpretations of this concept is Paul's (or Pseudo-Paul's) Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (2. 6-7). Given its importance and impact on (past and present) theo-political concepts, I will quote it here in its entirety:

¹Concerning the coming [*tēs parousias*] of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, ²not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us — whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter — asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. ³Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebel-

lion [*apostasia*] occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed [*kai apokaluphthēi ho anthrōpos tēs anomias*], the man doomed to destruction. ⁴He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. ⁵Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? ⁶And now you know what is holding him back [*to katechon*], so that he may be revealed [*apokaluphthēnai*] at the proper time. ⁷For the secret power of lawlessness [*to mustērion tēs anomias*] is already at work [*energeitai*]; but the one who now holds it back [*ho katechōn*] will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed [*apokaluphthēsetai ho anomos*], whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming [*tē epiphaneia tēs parousias autou*].²

In this passage, the present participle of the verb *katechō* is used, first in the neuter (*to katechon*), then in the masculine (*hō katechōn*). In both cases, its meaning is 'the restrainer': first, it is a *something*, some kind of power that defers, restrains, postpones; and then it is 'the one', 'he' who restrains. Now, what exactly does this 'restrainer' hold back? According to the quoted passage, it is evidently the 'lawlessness', 'the evil' — but that is not all. At the same time that the *katéchon* restrains evil, it/he also keeps it from coming to light (another meaning of the Latin *restringere*).³ The *katéchon* impedes and postpones *both* the unleashing *and* the revelation of evil, of iniquity. For the revelation of evil occurs only with the second coming of the messiah,

2 Quoted according to *Holy Bible: New International Version* (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 1984). The Greek is transcribed according to *Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. by Eberhard Nestle, Barbara Aland, and Kurt Aland (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

3 See above, fn 1.

the so-called *parousia*. Only when evil is revealed or on the condition that it fully manifests itself, is it in fact destroyed (one of the underlying messages of this passage).⁴ And it is in this sense that the *katéchon* must be understood as a Janus-faced figure (just as it is both neuter and masculine in the passage). It holds back the outburst of evil, of chaotic lawlessness, but at the same time it also holds back the revelation and hence the ultimate defeat of evil. The *katéchon* is thus the biblical figure that stands for ‘order’ (*nomos*) while the ‘secret power of lawlessness’ (*to mustērion tēs anomias*) is at work. (It should be added, of course, that *nomos* is necessary only because there is *anomias* — and the *anomias* is here not to be confused with grace or any other state that would transcend the *nomos*.)⁵ It controls the lawlessness and postpones its unchecked eruption — but it can’t overcome it. The final defeat of ‘lawlessness’ is reserved for the messianic power.

In this very ambiguity lies, I would suggest, the main significance of the *katéchon* as a kind of cultural

4 In Revelations 20. 2–3, 7–10, another passage points to the same logic: here we read that the ‘ancient serpent’, which will have been ‘bound’ for a ‘thousand years’, ultimately, at the end of times, ‘must be let out for a little while’ (the implication being, again, that this will lead to its ultimate destruction).

5 Which is the reading Giorgio Agamben proposes in *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). The *katéchon* is a recurrent and clearly central figure in Agamben’s writings; see for example: *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government. Homo Sacer II, 4*, trans. by Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm. Homo Sacer II, 2*, trans. by Nicholas Heron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); ‘Leviathan’s Riddle’, in *Leviathans Rätsel*, trans. by Paul Silas Peterson (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); *The Church and the Kingdom*, trans. by Leland de la Durantaye (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Ur-concept of the double-movement or double-dynamic of *restringere*.⁶ And a careful reading of the quoted passage makes clear why, from Hippolytus and Tertullian to Augustin and even to Luther, the *katéchon* at times stands for political order as such, and at other times for the Roman Empire (as the last Empire before the coming of Christ),⁷ and at yet other times for both at once: the political order is what controls the power of lawlessness (while chaos and evil brew underneath). Worldly political power thus cannot be condemned — it fulfils a necessary function. At the same time, the political order is not to be confused with the messianic, since the *katéchon*, as good

6 With this I do not mean to imply that the *katéchon* is the *only* ‘cultural *Ur*-concept’ of the double-dynamic of *restringere*. But it seems to be a particularly prominent and theo-politically charged concept implying two opposing and, also in their temporality, opposed powers.

7 After the disintegration of the Roman Empire, the *katéchon* was identified, for example, with the Empire of Charles the Great and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The Catholic Church, too, was long believed to fulfil the catechontical function. See among many other contributions to the history of the figure of the *katéchon* and both its temporal and political implications: Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. by G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2006), pp. 58–70; Wilhelm Stählin, ‘Die Gestalt des Antichristen und das “katechon”’, in *Festgabe Joseph Lortz*, ed. by Erwin Iserloh and Peter Manns, 2 vols (Baden-Baden: Grimm, 1958), II: *Glaube und Geschichte*, pp. 1–12; G. Meyer, C. Schetter, and J. Prinz, ‘Spatial Contestation? The Theological Foundations of Carl Schmitt’s Spatial Thought’, *Geoforum*, 43 (2012), pp. 687–96; Sergei Prozorov, ‘The Katechon in the Age of Biopolitical Nihilism’, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 45.4 (2012), pp. 483–505; Felix Grossheutschi, *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996); William Rasch, ‘Messias oder Katechon? Carl Schmitts Stellung zur politischen Theologie’, in *Politische Theologie*, ed. by Jürgen Brokoff and Jürgen Fohrmann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003), pp. 39–54; Paul Metzger, *Katechon: II Thess2, 1–12 im Horizont apokalyptischen Denkens* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005); Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Massimo Cacciari, *The Withholding Power: An Essay on Political Theology*, trans. by Edi Pucci (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

and useful as it/he is in its/his restraining and controlling potency, simultaneously withholds the second coming of Christ, that is, the messianic event. By doing so and by sustaining the state of affairs in which lawlessness may remain concealed, the *katéchon* — that is, for the sake of simplicity, the political order — does not exactly collude with evil, but entertains an alliance with it. It is this particular relationship with evil that renders worldly power, as indispensable as it is, an always already corrupted safeguard against disorder. No salvation and no overcoming of the underlying anomic and chaotic powers can occur within politics. At the same time, there is no doing without politics.

With regards to a particular figure of the restrainer, the power that withholds, the biblical *katéchon*, Roberto Esposito has noted, in his *Immunitas*, that there is an ‘aporetic node of life and death, of momentum and restraint, of opening and binding’ inherent to the katechontic.⁸ The restraining *katéchon* is the principle that, in a way, withholds the coming of the end, thereby postponing death, the ultimate limit or *finis*, or finitude *tout court*. Even if understood independently of the biblical context, one could thus understand the power that restrains at once as a negative force — namely, as a force that withholds movement and action (or drama in the sense of flowing and forward moving action) — and at the same time as a positive force, a force that withholds the end, expiration, death.

My contention is that the ‘re-’ in ‘restrain’ is what adds to the ‘strain’, the *stringere*, this aporetic dimension, this double-bind of moving forward and halting, and this double-logic of being at once something one wishes would

8 Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 57.

prevail and something one wishes would loosen or release to allow the motion to proceed. Restraint always has a double focus — and an ambivalent one at that. It is also my contention that the logic — the paradoxical logic — of the restrainer is deeply ingrained in all processes of life, of drama, of action, of being, and of politics: it is not only the paradox that there is no action without it being at once withheld *and* sustained, but also the ambivalence that it will always remain unclear whether the end being striven for is good or bad. The ‘re-’ of *restringere* thus points to the inherent paradox of representing time as motion, to the inherent ‘aporetic node’ of the restrainer itself. Read before the backdrop of a long tradition of understanding this aporetic logic of the withholding power in terms of the *katéchon*, the prefix at the same time conveys to what extent diametrically opposed concepts of the political continue to populate the Western imagination. If the ‘secular order’ or ‘worldly government’ has the function of withholding *both* the ultimate salvation *and* the final outbreak of chaos, it is unclear whether one should hasten its demise or work for its enduring power. In this line of thought, a sustained — and still outstanding — reflection on the *katéchon* in all its cultural and imaginative ramifications might help to restrain, this time in the sense of ‘to expose’, important but, to this day, insufficiently understood dimensions of the political imagination of the West.

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