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# Derrida, Buddhism, and the Future of Human Dignity

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A month before Jacques Derrida died, the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* ran an interview with him,<sup>1</sup> which was later published as *Apprendre à vivre enfin* (*Learning to Live Finally*, 2005). What would it mean to learn to live? And finally? Can we learn how to live at all?

The title came from Derrida's statement, "I would like to learn to live, finally," which appeared in his seminal work *Spectres de Marx* (*Specters of Marx*, 1993). It is noteworthy that Derrida's first explicit engagement with Marxism begins with a seemingly apolitical question: how to learn to live. How does the political question of Marxism enlighten our existential question of how to live?

I will consider this question by engaging with Derrida's work and with Buddhist philosophy.<sup>2</sup> I will use a lens of comparative philosophy to explore what both of these can teach us about being human and living with others in our politically and socially turbulent world.

## 1. Life and Philosophy or the Logic of Exclusion

What does it mean to learn to live? What does it involve? In the interview, Derrida asks: is living something that can be learned or taught? Derrida answers his own question as follows: "Learning to live should mean learning to die, learning to take into account, so as to accept, absolute mortality." For Derrida, this means to accept our mortality "without salvation, resurrection, or redemption."<sup>3</sup> The philosopher suffering from a pancreatic cancer confesses: "I remain uneducable when it comes to any kind of wisdom about knowing-how-to-die or, if you prefer, knowing-how-to-live."<sup>4</sup> The

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1. "Entretien avec Jacques Derrida, 'Je suis en gerre contre moi-même'," 4 September 2004, *Le Monde*. The interview took place a month earlier in August 19, 2004.

2. Scholars have noted the similar worldviews in Buddhists' and in Derrida's philosophy since the 1980s. See, for example, Robert R. Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1984); David Loy, ed. *Healing Deconstruction* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996); and Jin Y. Park, ed. *Buddhisms and Deconstructions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). In these publications, Buddhist concepts of dependent co-arising, emptiness, and logic of *Catuṣkoṭi* (four-cornered logic) have been compared to Derrida's *différance*, trace, text, and so on.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Apprendre à vivre* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), p. 24; *Learning to live finally*, translated by Jean Birnbaum (Hoboken, N.J.: Melville House Pub. 2007), p. 24.

4. *Ibid.*

unambiguously personal existential question of life, death, takes a conspicuously political turn in Derrida's discussion:

We are all survivors who have been granted a temporary reprieve [en sursis] (and, from the geopolitical perspective of *Specters of Marx*, this is especially true, in a world that is more inegalitarian than ever, for the millions and millions of living beings—human or not—who are denied not only their basic “human rights,” which date back two centuries and are constantly being refined, but first of all the right to a life worthy of being lived).<sup>5</sup>

Mortality is the reality of human existence. How is this mortality related to condition of human rights and to the inequality that Derrida sees as having gotten worse over the past two centuries?

To begin our discussion, I will take a path that has not been popular in the Western philosophical tradition: the path through a life story. Biography has not been a welcome genre in Western philosophy. Philosophy is supposed to present universal truth; biography, insofar as it records the incidents of a *particular* individual's life, cannot be a source for *universal* truth. But Derrida takes a different approach to the relationship between philosophy and life events. As he once puts it: “Philosophy is psychology and biography together, a movement of the living psyche, and thus of individual life and the strategy of this life, insofar as it assembles all the philosophemes and all the ruses of truth.”<sup>6</sup> We will follow Derrida's lead to figure out what Derrida wants to tell us about “learning to live.”

Derrida is a Jewish Frenchman who was born in Algeria, where he spent his childhood. One day, in 1942, a school official called him to his office and told him, “You are going to go home, my little friend, your parents will get a note.” This was how Derrida was expelled from his school—with no explanation. “At the moment I understood nothing, but since?”<sup>7</sup> As a 12-year-old boy, he did not know much about anti-Semitism and the motivations behind it. But, Derrida asks, as grownups, do we know better about why and how such discrimination exists in our society? He was expelled (excluded) from school because he was a Jew. Furthermore, those who expelled him were not Germans but were French people motivated by the anti-Semitism of the French Vichy government. What would you do if your society said you were wrong not because you had done something wrong but because of your race, gender, social class, or sexual orientation? We might suppose that in order to be accepted as a member of the community, we should conform to the judgment of the community, however wrong that judgment might be. Or we might conclude that it is time to rethink the value system of the society that condemns the values we support. Derrida says

5. Derrida, *Apprendre à vivre*, p. 25; *Learning to live finally*, p. 25.

6. Jacques Derrida, “I have a taste for the secret,” in *A Taste for the Secret*, Derrida, J., Ferraris, M., Donis, G., Webb, D., & Donis, G. *A taste for the secret*. (Malden: Polity, 2002), p. 35.

7. Derrida, *La carte postale de Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), p. 97; *The post card: From Socrates to Freud and beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 87-88. Derrida discusses the incident again in “I have a taste for the secret,” pp. 37-39.

that to explain his experience of being expelled from school at age 12, he felt a new approach to our thinking and value system was needed, and that new form of philosophizing would become known as “deconstruction.”<sup>8</sup>

Derrida’s deconstruction brings our attention to the impact of the logic of exclusion on our thinking, value structures, and understanding of ourselves and others. Our understanding of the world is anchored on the dualistic structure. The self constitutes the external world on the basis of the subject’s preferences. The self also has a tendency to valorize the values of the group it belongs to, either in reality or in its imagination. The result is a dichotomy between the self and others, men and women, haves and have-nots, and the East and the West. A comprehensive expression of this binary formula for understanding the world is the tension between the center and the margin.

The dualistic worldview is based on the assumption that one’s identity has an unshakable ground, which is in turn linked to the concepts of purity and privilege. The self’s belief in the quality it represents becomes a justification for a hierarchical judgment between the self and others. Both Derrida and Buddhism challenge this logic of identity and propose that our existence has a relational nature.

## 2. From the Identity Principle to the Relational Existence

Derrida claims that Western philosophy has anchored itself on the idea that our identity is fundamentally grounded on a given essence, which functions as its foundation. This essence is more valuable, pure, and close to soul and is the source of ultimate existence. Challenging such a hierarchical and dualistic view of existence, Derrida demonstrates that none of the seemingly pure and positive characteristics of our existence exists as it is, but only through its opposite. Light does not exist without darkness; presence does not exist without absence. There is no pure identity as such, since identity is being made through difference from others (*la différance*) and their trace (*la trace*). If identity becomes possible through its opposite, the privilege and hierarchy are nullified because, for example, the idea of purity cannot be self-constructed, but requires its opposite, impurity. What this amounts to, for Derrida, is that identity is based on the logic of limit or exclusion. Purity earns its identity by excluding impurity, by devaluing that which makes its identity possible.

This seemingly abstract discussion of the logic of exclusion becomes clearer in terms of how it functions as an architect of discrimination in our society if we take a more concrete example. In his reading of *Lonely Tropical* (*Tristes Tropiques*, 1955), Derrida calls our attention to Lévi-Strauss’s discussion of people without writing, and to the extension of this, a people without history. Levi-

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8. Early in his career, Derrida took pains to problematize the question “what is deconstruction?” The essentializing and essentialist tendency of philosophy is based on modes of the question, “What is...?” (*De la grammatologie*, p. 32; *Of Grammatology*, p. 19). To Derrida, any effort to define deconstruction is wrong, because deconstruction “takes place” (*Derrida and Différance*, edited by David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988], p. 4).

Strauss's intention was good even though based on a misleading logic. He aimed to say that the Nambikwara people, a tribe in the wilds of Brazil, did not have a *writing system* and were thus purer than civilized people like himself, an anthropologist from Europe.

Derrida asks whether there exist a people who do not have writing. Who are the people without writing (or language) and history? And can any human society exist without writing and history? People without writing systems are in fact without writing. But does the absence of a writing system amount to the absence of language? Does it make people purer, or more innocent and free of violence? Ironically, by declaring the lack of language to be a state free from violence, the anthropologist deprived the people of Nambikwara of their thinking and history.

Writing as a specific sign system is only a part of writing for Derrida. When we say "those people who do not have writing or history," the rule of exclusion is already at work. *Who are these people without language or speech?* Remembering his time in Algeria, Derrida once said that he did not have language. The only mother tongue he had was French, but what he spoke was not French, since French meant the French spoken not merely in France, but in Paris, the language of the center.

Addressing the postcolonial subject, Gayatri Spivak asked, "Can the subaltern speak?" One might assume that once a colonized people are liberated, they will speak their own language. Can this really happen? The formerly colonized people cannot but have internalized the colonizer's ideas and language, regardless of their intention. Even though the physical time marks the liberation, in the human time or the time called existence, the trace of colonialism cannot be erased. People in the post-colonial time still speak the language of the colonizer and think the thoughts instilled by the colonizer. Can women speak when a patriarchal structure is loosened? Ideas, systems, and language are already charged by the patriarchal standard; and without disturbing the existing modes of thinking, rules, and norms, liberation—whether liberation of women, of the colonized subject, or of a certain social class—cannot empower the liberated subject.

Can Asians speak? They cannot, if the world continues to make the Western mode of thinking the standard way of thinking, and Western rules insist on being the default rules for the entire global community.

No matter what native languages Asians have spoken for centuries, and no matter what intellectual traditions they have preserved—in some cases, for longer than Western traditions have existed—as long as the global community is closed to new modes of thinking and new rules for governing, those at the margin of the global community do not have a language or a history. Nor do women, or the subaltern, or those at the bottom of the economic ladder in a capitalist society. It is not that there are people literally without language or history; rather, there are people whose language and history are not accepted as language and history by those who have power and privilege.

People whose language and history are not accepted become marginalized and excluded from their right to participate in the creation of social and communal values. Worse, the outside is not

just that which cannot be a part of the inside; the outside is blamed for being the impure force contaminating the “purity” of the inside, and is thus accused of causing social and communal problems. Women are considered impure; in most of the world’s major religions and philosophical traditions, they are portrayed as temptresses, the cause of men’s downfall. African-Americans are considered violent, the cause of all the shootings in American society. Homosexuality is charged with impurity, in an attempt to justify why homosexuality is not regarded as a “natural” way of existence.

Why is purity more valuable than impurity, and why does purity enjoy the privilege of needing protection at the expense of that which is considered impure? Purity, in this case, is associated with being of itself, being in itself, and without being mixed with others. The myth of being-oneself, and the rhetoric of purity, is the basis of the logic of essence, the origin. Derrida claims that “there is no simple origin,”<sup>9</sup> and that the question of origin is unavoidably related to the question of the essence.<sup>10</sup> Against such a tradition, Derrida tells us: “We should think about trace before the being.”<sup>11</sup>

Our existence and meaning structure are possible through *différance* and trace. Derrida calls this ecology of our existence and meaning structure “the text.” Deconstruction is known as a reading of a text. But for Derrida, “text” is not limited to literal texts like the books we read. The “text” is the environment in which we exist.

### 3. The Buddha and Philosophy

In *The Laṅkāvatāra Scripture*, one of the major Buddhist texts, the Buddha criticizes philosophers who look at the world with the assumption that there exists an unchanging essence or foundation within it. He also criticizes philosophers who look at the world from the dualistic perspective of self versus others.

The Buddha claimed that his teaching, which he identified as the Middle Path (中道), went against both the foundationalist and dualistic worldviews. He claimed that people look at the world from two extremes: “This exists” is one extreme, and “This does not exist” is another. What is the middle between “that which exists” and “that which does not exist”? Buddhism answers this with a concept of relational identity known as “dependent co-arising” (緣起).

Warning against the human tendency to look at the world from the subject’s perspective, Buddhism teaches that the subject is always both subject and object. When I see an object, I am the subject looking at the object, but I am also an object from the object’s position. The subject-centered worldview is myopic in this sense. What this implies is that the self-identity the subject deems solid is in fact a fluid reality that is constantly in the making as the current self encounters

9. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, (Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1967), p. 55.

10. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 110.

11. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 69; *Of Grammatology*, p. 47.

itself both as subject and as object. This fluidity of the self is not something one should be pessimistic about, though. It is power because it allows change and growth.

The Chinese Huayan Buddhist thinker Fazang (法藏, 643-712) explains the logic of identity formation through the notions of “mutual identity” (相即) and “mutual containment” (相入). One’s identity is possible because the identity of others become “contained” within it. Fazang uses the number system to demonstrate his point. Consider the numbers 1 through 10. The number 3 is the number 3 because it is “different” from the other numbers; at the same time, within the number 3 is the trace of all the other nine numbers. The number 3 and the other numbers dependently attain their identities. Derrida explained this through the concepts of “différance” and “trace.”

Fazang explains the epistemological process in which of beings are viewed as independent entities, and the non-existence of the essence of those entities, through the idea of the three natures (三性): imaginary nature (遍計所執性), other-dependent nature (依他起性), and round and complete nature (圓成實性).<sup>12</sup> Suppose something happened that made you angry at your friend. What we usually notice at the time of anger is the anger itself. That is imaginary nature. This doesn’t mean that the anger is false or that the person who is angry is lying or being absurd. Rather, it means that we are isolating the phenomenon so that we have the limited view of the anger itself. If we take a step back and think about how the moment of anger happened, we see various factors that led the situation. Thus, the occurrence of anger is other-dependent. If we move a step further, we see that the anger itself doesn’t have a fixed identity that we should hold on to and keep being angry. The anger does not have the essence of anger: it is empty to us, in Buddhist vocabulary.

The Buddhist idea of the dependency of our existence, the three natures, is practice-oriented. These are tools to explain how we should overcome afflicting emotions, disturbing experiences, and the pain and suffering caused by them. Derrida and Buddhism meet in this realm of living the life, or learning to live.

#### 4. Logic of Exclusion, Violence, and Suffering

Derrida identifies hierarchical dualism as the foundational logic of Western metaphysics and characterizes the nature of this philosophy as “violence.”

In *Of Grammatology* (1967), he identifies three levels of violence: (1) the first level of violence is language; (2) the second level is moral system and the law; (3) the third level is what we usually regard as violence, “evil, war, indiscretion, rape.”<sup>13</sup>

Derrida calls the violence of language an original violence (*la violence originaire*) or arch-violence (*archi-violence*). Language is a system or institution that functions by naming and differentiating. Its capacity to present that which cannot be presented is its *raison d’être*, its supreme benefit and at the same time its limitation. If we accept the relational identity as proposed by both

12. 金師子章雲間類解, Taisho, vol. 45, no. 1884, p. 660a

13. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, pp. 164-165.

Derridean and Buddhist philosophy, language cannot but be an obstacle in our understanding of the world and self. The irony, however, is that language is not an optional element in our existence. Law and moral systems are what we consider to exist for the benefit of our life. Laws and morality are constructed, not given, which means that there are authors for the laws and morality.

The three layers of violence help us understand how the logic of exclusion causes violence in social and political issues such as immigration, asylum, cosmopolitanism, the death penalty, and the question of the animal and sovereignty.

## 5. The Gaze of the Animal, of the Sovereign, and of the Beast

In his later works, Derrida addresses the problem of dualistic categorization in terms of the categorical division between human and non-human animals. He draws our attention to the problem of using the generic term *the animal* as if all animals belong to the same category. A snake is different from a rabbit, which is different from a cow, which is different from a cat. Why do we categorize them all as *the animal*, even without using the plural? Derrida says that as soon as we use the expression *the animal*, we put them in a cage. This is the violence of humans against the animals that continues in the form of the animal and food industry.<sup>14</sup>

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008; *L'animal que donc je suis*, 2006), Derrida revisits a major theme in his philosophy: categorization. As soon as a category is established, hierarchical positioning settles down. The categories of *animal* and *human* is essential in the self-identity of humans since humans claim themselves in distinction of its opposite, animal.

The title *The Animal That Therefore I Am* is a parody of Descartes's "I think therefore I am." In this book, Derrida describes his cat looking at him naked in his bathroom. Nakedness and gaze—two instances that define the difference between animal and human. Humans look at the animal, not the other way around. But Derrida asks whether it is not also the case that we are being looked at by our cats and dogs and so on.

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called "animal" offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the border crossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself."<sup>15</sup>

Derrida's discussion of animal takes further a social and political turn in his last seminar on the beast and the sovereign. In this seminar, he points out that the beast and the sovereign share

14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry49Jr0TFjk>

15. Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis* (Paris: Galilée, 2006), p. 30; Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, translated by Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 12.

the same position with respect to the law: both stand outside of it. The beast is not subject to the law because it is below the law; the sovereign, because he is above the law. What is the beast, though? Is the negative connotation of *beast* a part of the innate nature of the beings we categorize as beasts, or is it an evaluative term we assign to them? And who is the sovereign? Derrida defines the sovereign as the one who has “the right to suspend the rights of others.” The sovereign, then, locates himself at the other end of a dualistic power structure from the beast. But through the very right to suspend the rights of the others, the sovereign always has the potential to abuse his power and turn into a beast. Although the beast and the sovereign are on opposite sides of the scales of values and powers, they can quickly come to be on the same side.

The beast and the sovereign, or the animals and the humans, live in the same world yet do not live in the same world. Just as there exists a difference between animals and humans, and between the beast and the sovereign, differences also exist between various human groups: men and women, have and have-nots, and so on. The sameness of gender does not mean that two people belong to a homogeneous group, either. There can be no end to this discriminatory grouping. What justifies this discrimination, and what is the basis of grouping? As Derrida puts it, between my world and the other worlds to which I belong there exists an infinite gap.<sup>16</sup>

The members of all these different groups, including the beast and the sovereign, share one thing: they are living beings. To be alive means to be finite: to be a being with limitations. Mortality thus emerges as the condition of existence for all the beings in all the different categories, whether beast or sovereign.

And awareness of mortality makes us realize that solitude is the fundamental condition of existence. Solitude, in turn, ironically also reminds us of the existence of others. If we were not aware of the existence of others—of those who might fill the gaps created by our solitude—we would not even be aware of our own solitude and aloneness. I, with my mortality and my solitude, and others with their mortality and solitude, constitute the world. There are two types of solitude, Derrida tells us: the natural solitude derived from the mortality and limitations of a living being, and the solitude imposed by society, which he calls the solitude of the law. *Law*, here, is not limited to actual legislation but includes all forms of exclusivist modes that occur in our communal existence.

Buddhism tells us how socially imposed solitude, like natural solitude, causes suffering for me and for our fellow beings, and asks us to remind ourselves of our common ground of existence. This awareness is a starting point of the Buddhist practice of compassion, of feeling the suffering of other beings and striving to alleviate their suffering.

Engaged Buddhism in modern times is a product of Buddhism’s social concerns. Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the leading figures in the movement and the coiner of the expression “Engaged Buddhism,” tells us how the realization of our mortality should teach us the solidarity of being:

16. Derrida, *Séminaire: La bête et le souverain* (Paris: Galilée, 2010) vol. II, p. 31.

“When your beloved says something that hurts you, try this practice: Close your eyes, breathe mindfully in and out, and visualize the two of you one hundred years from now.”<sup>17</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh says that with this practice, after three breaths we will no longer feel hurt and instead we may want to hug the one who hurt us. It will take much longer for a normal practitioner to arrive at this stage than Thich Nhat Hanh promises here, but the message is clear. Envisioning our mortality makes us realize the vanity of many of our reactions that are based on fleeting emotions and thus fosters bonding not only with those we love but also with those who have hurt us. Buddhism is sensitive to human frailty; finitude of being, vanity of desire, unstable reaction to the situation at hand cause suffering perhaps not because of their frailty and temporality but because of a misconceived view of human capacity and existence. If one vainly boasts, the boasting may not in itself be something to be criticized or corrected. But when such boasting causes suffering to others and to the actor himself, Buddhism would advise the practitioner to examine the nature of the boasting and the suffering it has caused in light of human mortality, which should bring out the different meanings of the act.

## 6. The Human Image in a Changing World

What does learning to live involve, if we can ever do it? And what does our discussion of Derridean and Buddhist approaches to human existence and relational identity tell us about the image of human beings in the changing world?

Derrida states that to live means to live with “others” (*l’être-avec*), and that these others are not just the other people living with us now in our community.<sup>18</sup> They are “specters,” not in the sense that they are not real but in the sense that they are always there, even though we might not recognize them. My existence at this moment cannot be separated from what I have done and how I have lived; what I was and what I am are not independent of what others were in the past and who they are now.

Asking the question of why any individual should take responsibility if his or her identity is constructed through differences and traces, Derrida says, “To *be* . . . means . . . to inherit. All the questions on the subject of being or of what is to be (or not to be) are questions of inheritance” (emphasis in original).<sup>19</sup>

In his call for awareness of our common heritage, Derrida urges us to see the image and position of humans in our time anew. And we need to be careful in envisioning ourselves as the inheritors of a common past and culture. About twenty-five years ago, during a controversial debate on culture, the American literary critic and public intellectual Henry Louis Gates asked, “Whose culture is it,

17. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Understanding Our Mind: 51 Verses on Buddhist Psychology*, Parallax Press, p. 206. Kindle Edition.

18. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, p. 15.

19. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, p. 94; *Specters of Marx*, p. 54.

anyway?”<sup>20</sup> in a *New York Times* article. The piece was written in response to Donald Kagan, then dean of Yale College, exhorting the college’s freshmen to uphold the Western cultural heritage. He argued that at the core of Western culture were “tolerance and respect for diversity” and that “Western culture and institutions are the most powerful paradigm in the world”<sup>21</sup> Gates, who is an African-American, warned that the culture Kagan tried to inspire the students with is a monologue, because for a person of color in the U.S., that Western culture was built on slavery and racial discrimination. Culture, Gates writes, “is always a conversation among different voices.” If the heritage that Dean Kagan meant was that of white males, it was not a culture one should be proud of, nor something we should teach to our younger generation.

As Derrida said, to live means to live in the world that we have inherited. Our common inheritance and our debt to that inheritance are reminders that our existence is not fragmented but always already communal. This communal nature of our existence, however, is not to be categorized through gender, ethnicity, or social class in such a way as to valorize a specific tradition at the expense of others. What we have learned from recent human history, I believe, is that no man is island, and in fact no being is an island. The problems that the global community faces today—discrimination, ethnic, religious, and social conflict, and ecological problems—call for a realization that human beings should step aside from their self-centered world, including the egocentric, patriarchal, West-centric, and anthropocentric assertion. Nobody has a birthright to discriminate and cause suffering to other beings; nobody has the privilege to dominate others at their expense; nobody has the capacity to live by themselves. We all owe others for our survival.

This realization leads us to the ultimatum of the solidarity of beings. This solidarity does not exclude someone because of gender, ethnicity, social class, or any other category humans invented to privilege some at the expense of others. This solidarity cannot exclude non-human animals or nature, since humans do not and cannot exist in separation from them.

As Derrida’s concept of the future (*l’avenir*) indicates, and Buddhist idea of enlightenment teaches us, this solidarity is not a goal to pursue but a practice that should continue each and every moment we live this life. However great today’s lunch might be, we will have to eat another lunch tomorrow, and another the day after. Why should we expect something less when we try to envision humans being better than they were yesterday?

20. Henry Louis Gates, “Whose Culture Is It, Anyway?” *New York Times*, May 4, 1991, p. 23.

21. Donald Kagan, “Western Values are Central.” *New York Times*, May 4, 1991, p. 23.