

Review of *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought*
in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7.2 (June 2008)

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This is a very timely book. In the first place, there has obviously been an increasing emphasis on theoretical and applied ethics within the domain of academic philosophy in recent decades—itsself a function of the increasing complexities, ambiguities and dangers of contemporary (or “postmodern”), high-tech-driven lifestyles in the most developed societies. In the second place, as Youru Wang notes in his excellent introduction, there have also been two more-or-less independent movements “within deconstruction.” On the one hand, Derridean deconstructive strategies of *différance* and *aporia* which suspend, defer or displace dualities (rather than totally eliminating or “identifying” them) have been, since the 1980s, applied to South and East Asian philosophical/religious texts in increasingly sophisticated ways. On the other hand, Derrida himself in the mid-to-late 1980s (and partly under the influence of Levinas) began moving toward more “ethical” modes of reflection, ways of thinking about the difference and singularity of the “other” in a more overtly social and political context.

The essays in this book, all of which are very fine, are looking at South and East Asian philosophical texts in the light of the later Derrida (and Levinas), or more precisely they are exploring the ways in which strategies of deconstructive or “aporetic” ethics—which is not exactly the same thing as “the ethics of deconstruction”—that have been in operation for centuries in Asian thinking resonate with certain key strategies of deconstructive ethics (especially as found in Derrida) in the west. The first seven essays deal with “ethical dimensions and the deconstructions of normative ethics in various Asian traditions,” while the last five focus “on similarities and differences between Derridean-Levinasism and Asian ethical thought” (5).

Several of the authors note that Derrida himself never felt—although he was often accused of this by uncomprehending readers— that his early-period deconstruction was “not ethical” (even if, in its emphasis on language, meaning, logic and metaphysics it was inevitably ignoring ethics in some sense), any more than it was a form of absolute skepticism or relativism. As Nuyen puts it in “Levinas and Laozi on the Deconstruction of Ethics”: “. . . Derrida accepts that there are such things as meaning, truth and values, taking them to be the outcomes of *Difference*” (163). . . . It is

the differing and deferrings of language that produce meanings, truths and values . . ." (164). Furthermore, even the early Derrida never says there is "nothing beyond language"; rather, not only texts but language in general "must have an 'other' outside of it [which] leaves a trace within . . . inhabiting the in-between of words and concepts, and of the binary oppositions of words and concepts" (164). And as for oppositions like that between "self/other" and (closely correlated with it) "good/evil"—a constitutive duality of traditional, normative ethics—in aporetic ethics the undecidable, indeterminate trace of the in-between is also the Other (e.g. Dao, Saying) that lies beyond the conceptualized, determinate system (Logos, Totality, etc.)

David Loy in "Lacking Ethics" states that while Derridean deconstruction tends to emphasize the good/evil dualism in his ethical thinking, Buddhism emphasizes the closely-related self/other dualism. Good/evil has, Loy notes, become "a more public and controversial" antinomy in post-9/11 geopolitics: the problem is that while Osama represents evil for Bush the converse is also true; these two extreme positions, finally indistinguishable, are in a sense the cause or ground of one another. (In Borges' "...," the protagonist's realization that he ultimately *is* his own mortal enemy has the positive, liberating sense of an absolute transcendence of war and violence, by extension of all "evil." Thus the need for an aporetic ethics, in which there is neither an absolute identity nor absolute opposition of/ between the two terms but only the elusive trace of difference, of the other, which can be followed into the space-between and/or beyond the limits of the total structure or system.

As for deconstructing the Chan Buddhist self/world duality, Loy cites Dogen's *Genjo-koan*: "To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly" (117). Loy explains: "The primary ethical implication of this deconstruction is the realization that my life and destiny cannot be extricated from that of 'others' in the world. In this way responsibility for others arises naturally as the expression of genuine awakening" (118). Yet the singularity of each (deconstructed) self is crucial, for there is always the "possibility of a deconstructed ego-self . . . deferring to a collective we-go-self . . . a group-ego still understanding itself in opposition to a group-other. . . ." On the path to becoming a bodhisattva, one who "vows to 'save' all sentient beings . . . in practice it is not easy to escape one's social conditioning" (119).

Dan Lusthaus in "Zhuangzi's Ethics of Deconstructing Moralistic Self-Imprisonment" sets Zhuangzi within the wider framework of a Daoist tendency to deconstruct "standards"—moral norms but also, in an interesting variation on Plato, the mathematical, physical (as in space/time limits) and mechanical ones with which they are closely aligned. Here he elucidates this "normal" background by exploring passages from Confucius, Mozi and Mencius; he might have also mentioned Sunzi, who opens his *Bingfa (Art of War)* by advising the would-be successful general

to “measure” (*du*, 度) the space of his battlefield before a fight. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, questions (our ability to know) spatio- temporal limits: “Measuring (*liang* 量) things is without end; Time is without stopping; Apportionment is without permanence; Ends and beginnings are without causes” (65-66), and takes a perspectival or relativistic view of all things, one that includes the social realm: “Observing (things) by way of Dao, things have no ‘worthwhile’ or ‘worthless’; Observing them by way of things, each considers itself (*zi* 自) ‘important’ while all consider others ‘less important’; Observing them by way of common- convention ‘honorable’ and ‘contemptible’ are not defined by individuals [but communally]” (66). The problem of constructing such moral discriminations or limits (“worthwhile” “worthless,” etc.) is that they tend to divide us from other people, pushing them away while imprisoning ourselves (as “men of virtue”) in our own self-exertions (to be virtuous). As many of the essays in the book suggest in one way or another, it is paradoxically the sharp division between opposing moral “values” that (as with Bush’s good/evil as opposed to Osama’s), far from creating a peaceful and harmonious society or world, creates disharmony, chaos, violence, war.

However, the praxis of “forgetting the self” is looked at from a slightly different perspective by Lusthaus than by Loy in his discussion of Dogen’s “actualization by myriad things.” Lusthaus argues that Zhuangzi’s aporetic ethics lies in his awareness of the *necessary difference* between his waking state as Zhuangzi (who dreamed he was a butterfly) and his dream state as a butterfly (who dreams he is Zhuangzi). This butterfly dream “is about the necessity of dreaming in order to wake from it, to become aware of real and necessary distinctions (‘There *must* be a difference’). The butterfly embodies the philosophy many readers attribute to Zhuangzi himself: forgetfulness, carefree meandering, etc. It is Zhuangzi’s dream, not his reality. When he wakes up, finding himself unmistakably the real Zhuangzi, he wonder whether he dreams or the dream dreams him. But there is a *necessary* difference between them” (64-65). This awareness of one’s own life, as well as self, as inevitably a difference is of course also a Derridean theme. Here Lusthaus compares Zhuangzi’s “dream-life” (as butterfly) to Derrida’s “dream of a unity, or finally of a place . . . of an idiomatic writing, and I call it Necessity; this dream is forever destined to disappointment; this unity remains inaccessible . . . [yet] this ‘dream’ institutes speech, writing, the voice, its timbre” (65).

Indeed, Lusthaus sees Derrida as coming close to Zhuangzi’s aporetic ethics in a passage that reminds us of Zhuangzi’s “Observing (things) by way of Dao, things have no ‘worthwhile’ or ‘worthless’”: “In this [social-political] domain nothing is clear or given any more than any other. However, this does not stop one from calculating strategies and taking decisions or responsibilities. . . . [I]t is to the extent that knowledge . . . remains suspended and undecided as to action, to the extent that a responsible decision . . . will never be measured by any form of knowledge . . . that there can and must be responsibility or decision” (66) This is closely related to Derrida’s famous claim, in *The Spectres of Marx*, that “justice is deconstruction.”

Nuyen's proposal that "in the *Daodejing*, *de* stands to *dao* as Levinas' ethic of responsibility stands to the otherwise of Being, to the *saying* from beyond essence" (162) also has, of course, a clear connection to Derrida's claims about ethical-political responsibility and the *aporia* of justice itself. Setting out to explore one case in which Derrida's "impossible justice" can "cross Buddhist justice," Robert Magliola in "Hongzhou Chan Buddhism and Derrida Early and Late" begins with the later Derrida's conclusion (which in fact "deconstructs Levinas") that "Law/singularity constitute a double-bind . . . because: [the *bind*] – justice to the third party necessarily violates justice to the singularity of the person-in-situation facing us (and *vice versa*); and yet . . . one should *not not*-act but *must* make a decision . . . Thus . . . one must necessarily work this *non*-path: law/singularity are an *aporia* because they constitute a double-bind . . . driven by an impossible justice" (176).

Magliola now contrasts with this "perverse" world-machinery, in which even the best-intentioned acts must do "injustice to someone," with the "*intention*-driven" world of Buddhism in which "the Dharmic machinery (the Law of the Universe) is perfectly just, and Chan Buddhism stresses that only empty intention (intention-free intention, or mind not attached to itself) liberates" (183). Thus in Hongzhou Chan we have a split between a teaching on Buddha-mind and karma that "operated within the social frame of Confucianist society whose determinate ethics tempered Chan's excesses," on the one hand, and the meditating monks' (intention-free, unattached) "play" with the Buddha-mind teaching, their provisional detachment from good karma. Given the assumption of a "perfectly just" universe, the monks' singular behavior can be deemed unethical but those remaining within the realm of law (the third party); thus Magliola proposes that "this teaching of Buddha-mind requires a counter-balancing force within the ideational structure of Chan [which is] the teaching of Nagarjuna's 'two truths,' according to which reality is both conventional and transcendent (ultimately empty) (184).

The first essay in the book, Purushottama Bilimoria's "Dismantling normativity in Indian ethics—from Vedic altarity to the *Gita*'s alterity"—resonates with the above-mentioned essays, including those emphasizing Levinas. It discusses the opposition between Hindu history/tradition—with its embedded norms, its Vedic religious rituals (the "altar") and social class structure—and the radical "alterity" of the *Bhagavad Gita*'s (historical/temporal "interruption." For "the action advocated by the *Gita* is no longer undertaken for the satisfaction of personal desires"—the desires of individual egos but also those of the highest (priestly) caste—"but for the benefit of all beings. . . .[E]mphasis is given to the devotion to [an] Other that is not a dualistic authority bifurcated from the world, but rather the totality of all the others The Vedic sacrificial offering in the altarity of ego is transformed into a sacrifice that returns one to the face of the other, the other as oneself" (6).

This reader found all twelve essays to be very solid in terms of scholarship and logic; they all

reflect deeply and in original ways on the most essential issues. One might think that including together in one anthology Hinduism and Confucianism (especially in On Cho Ng's essay on Neo-Confucianism, "The ethics of being and non-being: Confucian contestations on human nature (xing) in late imperial China") as well as Daoist and Buddhist—including Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka, Degon's Chan and Hong Chou Chan, Japanese and Korean as well as Chinese and Indian Buddhism—would be stretching (if not quite breaking) the limits. Yet obviously this breadth of scope or range, combined with the depth of individual essays and the various levels of resonance or "interaction" between and among them, makes the volume an invaluable resource for scholars. Nonetheless, ideally it seems that Hinduism might have been represented by more than one essay, and classical Confucianism by at least one.

I did also think (and this may well be a very subjective "perception") there might have been a little more emphasis on the sort of natural, common-sense, indeed instinctual basis of ethics we see in Zhuangzi's Confucianism-deflating observations, well-explored by Lusthaus, that "Tigers and wolves are *ren* (人, 'humane')" and "Perfected *ren* lacks *qin* 親" (76-77)—that is, the Confucian focus on idealized (and human-centered) "humanism" somehow misses the *qin*-natural affection between and among parents and siblings. (In other words, as Lusthaus puts it, "Trying to understand *ren* by pursuing a vague, or even clear ideal . . . rather than simply looking at its natural expressions all around, places one ever more remote from an understanding of *ren*," 78). Yet of course, in a certain sense neither philosophical-spiritual-religious nor academic-philosophical "ethics" can (insofar as they involve reflection) do this (though perhaps spiritual-religious reflection can); furthermore, tigers and wolves have other qualities besides their familial *qin*, ones which seem (at least to humans) much less "humane." Still, "ecological" thinking might have made more of an appearance in the book, even if one could hardly expect to see such other, current "bio-ethical" discourses as evolution, genetics and the "posthuman."

Finally, given that none of the essays (even those of Ng and Lusthaus) really goes into the Confucian Lunyu (論語) and for an obvious reason—classical Confucianism is generally placed alongside Platonism as that "conservative norm" against which (proto-)poststructuralist thinkers like Nietzsche and Derrida are thinking—and considering too the concrete, ritualistic side of religion that Bilimoria speaks of (and which some might wish to see more of in such an anthology), I also was thinking that the (ancient and current) practices and theories of ritual sacrifice could have made more of an appearance here, that is, beyond Bilimoria's Levinasian reflections on alterity/ alterity and Magliola's brief discussion of Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida on Abraham-and- Isaac. My favorite line in the 論語, after all, possesses its own kind of indeterminately deep, paradoxical or aporetic force. Here a student asks Confucius, "Master, what is the meaning of the Great Sacrifice?" and the master replies, "I do not know. Anyone who knows this can rule a kingdom as easily as one sees the back of one's own hand."