Derrida and Buddha:

A Review of Buddhisms and Deconstructions


For many years Robert Magliola has pioneered a bold effort to think together the Prasangika-Madhyamika tradition of Mahayana Buddhism inspired by Nagarjuna, the deconstructions of Jacques Derrida, and the Catholic tradition of Trinitarian and mystical theology. In Derrida on the Mend (1984), Magliola proposed to reflect “between the Tao” (Derrida), “a/Mid the Tao” (Heidegger), and “Across the Tao” (Buddhist and Christian differentialisms), interweaving Derrida’s and Heidegger’s projects with Nagarjuna and Christian theology and audaciously claiming that Derrida’s differentialism can illumine the mystery of the Christian Trinity better than traditional Western metaphysical models. In 1997 Magliola published a partially autobiographical reflection, On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture, which ranged widely across various painful, personal life experiences, as well as a number of academic deconstructive ventures. Half of the papers in the volume under review come from a panel on “Buddhism, Deconstruction and the Works of Robert Magliola,” which was held at the twenty-second annual conference of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature; the other papers were solicited for this volume. The volume concludes with a substantial “Afterword” by Magliola, in which he responds to various critics and dialogue partners.

Not claiming any direct dependence of Derrida upon Mahayana Buddhism, Magliola himself acknowledges that Derrida is not a Buddhist, “nor is he all that familiar with Buddhism as a philosophy” (262). Instead, Magliola looks for “some philosophical intersections” which cross each other; since lines do not have width, there is no quest for a “common ground” (262). What results is a fascinating, perplexing, and puzzling series of forays into language that repeatedly undermine any confidence in essentialist concepts. The movement is a performance that resists definition and conceptualization.

Setting the stage for many of the essays in this collection is Jin Y. Park’s reflection on Derrida’s différence and Mahayana understandings of dependent co-arising. Citing the Diamond Sutra, Park notes the age-old Mahayana practice of
negating statements. Shakyamuni Buddha denies that he teaches anything, and then is concerned that his teaching will be misunderstood. Shakyamuni “thus declares that ‘truth-statement’ is just a name” (7). Mahayana logic repeatedly negates statements and then negates the negation. Park notes that the *Nirvana Sutra* tells us, “the Buddha-nature neither exists nor non-exists/both exists and non-exists/ . . . being and non-being combined/this is what is called the middle path” (quoted on p. 9). The movement of negating and negating the negation expresses the dynamic movement of dependent co-arising without allowing any final conceptual resting point. Park rightly compares this movement to Derrida’s saying and unsaying of what he “would have wanted to say” (8). As Park puts it: “The unnameable has names, though as will become clear as we move on, such as the ‘middle path,’ the ‘middle voice,’ ‘dependent co-arising’ or difference.’ . . . These concepts are un-nameable because they violate the basic rules of language; but they have names because we need to discuss them” (8). Derrida, like the Mahayana tradition, seeks to escape the “‘instituting question of philosophy,’ which is ‘what is’” (10). Park proposes to view Buddhist dependent co-arising as “empirical realism” and Derrida’s difference as “semiotic realism” (13), but cautions that neither term is a thing nor a concept or an idea (17). Park is quite helpful and illuminating in suggesting analogous movements of language in Derrida and Mahayana, but along the way there are occasionally astounding misunderstandings of about Western philosophy, such as Park’s claim that for Descartes the ego-cogito is “the unoriginated origin as the ground of our being and the world” (11). Descartes’s famous Third Meditation, which was so important for Emmanuel Lévinas, clearly contradicts such a claim. Park confuses the Cartesian ego-cogito’s function as an epistemological starting point for reflection with the ontological foundation, the unoriginated origin, which for Descartes is God.

Some authors, like Jane Augustine and Gad Horowitz, respond directly to Magliola’s writings. Without much close inspection of philosophical texts, Augustine boldly asserts a refrain: “Philosophy is the enemy of experience” (171, 173, 176, 179), charging that “abstraction is the enemy of particulars, generalization the enemy of specifics” (176-77). Noting the difficulties of Magliola’s early experience of Catholic religious life, she finds “differentialism” to be his “revolutionary contribution to postmodernism” (177): Magliola discovered that Derrida’s deconstruction of the principle of identity used the same logical techniques as Nargujuna’s dismantling of an entitative theory of dharmas. Augustine finds Derrida and Nagarjuna interweaving with Magliola’s Carmelite Christian practice. One of the striking characteristics of this volume is its general
silence on the Jewish character of Derrida’s project. Thus it is ironic that when the Hebrew language does appear on page 175 of Jane Augustine’s essay, a quotation from Magiola’s *Derrida on the Mend* presents the Hebrew letters in reverse order (in Magiola’s original text they are correct).

Many other authors, such as Ian Mabbett, compare and contrast aspects of Mahayana Buddhism with Derrida without references to Magiola’s proposals. There are repeated assertions of real kinship in the movement of thought between Nagarjuna and Derrida, as well as several claims of a soteriological difference between the two. As is to be expected, there is no agreement on the proper interpretation of either Derrida or the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, or on how best to relate Derrida to the Mahayana tradition. The plurals in the title are indeed deliberate, with repeated suspicions of essentializing definitions.

Some note the difference that religious practice makes for interpreting perspectives. David Loy sees Derrida’s liberation as merely textual “and therefore still logocentric from a Buddhist point of view” and turns to meditation for “a letting-go of all thought/language” (70). Magliola retorts that Loy is subsuming Nagarjuna into a Yogacara “Mind-Only frame” (248). Meanwhile, Zong-qi Cai also charges that Derrida’s project would need the Buddhist practice of meditation. There is much that is illuminating and thought-provoking along the way, without, of course, any final resting point being offered.

What is perhaps most striking to this reader is the general silence of this volume regarding Derrida’s own exploration of his conflicted, unexpressible, impossible Jewish Arab identity and his paradoxical relationship to the Jewish tradition (Gad Horowitz does all too briefly note this background, evoking a few comments in response from Magiola). Many of the authors appear to read Derrida simply against the background of the Western European philosophical tradition and then proceed find various relationships of similarity and difference to Mahayana Buddhism. The view of Western philosophy is at times quite truncated, as when Park as editor tells us bluntly: “The Western philosophical tradition has maintained the position that philosophy does not have to include practice (167). It is hard to maintain such a dogmatic, universalizing view after the probing exploration of ancient philosophical practices by Pierre Hadot (*What Is Ancient Philosophy?* 2004).

Ten years ago, in 1997, John D. Caputo forcefully and persuasively argued for the importance of Derrida’s Jewish and North African heritage (*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*). As Caputo notes, the example of Levinas’s interpellation of Western philosophy from the perspective of the Hebrew prophetic tradition was a decisive stimulus to Derrida. Derrida extends
the passion for the impossible rooted in the prophets and apocalyptic seers of ancient Israel; deconstruction itself “is circumcision, where circumcision cuts open the same to the event of the other, thus constituting the breach that opens the way to the tout autre” (Caputo, xxv). On Caputo’s reading of Derrida, the valences of deconstruction move in an Abrahamic field: expectation of the impossible, leaps of faith that are ubiquitous but ungrounded, repeatedly settings of a place for an Elijah who is always expected. Caputo proposes that Derrida’s life and work offer an extended on the question of another North African: St. Augustine of Hippo’s query, “What do I love when I love my God?” (xxiii). The Abrahamic and North African contexts of Derrida shape a very different context from the tetralemma of Nagarjuna, which deserve reflection in the context of this volume’s explorations. Where David Loy proposes Buddhist meditative practice as providing “a non-site, or a non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy” (which Derrida has been seeking), it might be worth reflecting on the “prayers and tears” explored by Caputo as arising from a radically different religious orientation and intersecting in still more varied ways with Nagarjuna and his Mahayana companions. Rather than a deconstructive philosophical approach encountering a religious practice, we have a paradoxically deconstructive religious prayer encountering a vastly different Mahayana practice.

Works Cited


About the Reviewer

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