

Doctorate Research Proposal by Lauren A. Walker

Within the steps towards an Ethics of Relation and Action:

a comparative dialogue on the possibility of an ethical foundation between the positions of Levinas and Derrida in taking a syncretic stance inspired from a reading of two Buddhist models.

Introduction

The proposed thesis will map out an argument for a post-structural ethic, based upon a comprehensive reading of Derrida and Levinas and relevant secondary sources. The thesis will argue that the ethical promise of a combined stance of Levinas and Derrida has not so far been realised and in turn will propose a novel framework of rapprochement which can effectively motivate a path towards a new ethic. The basis of this framework borrows from two distinct readings of Buddhist sources—these being the syncretic model of *sudden awakening / gradual cultivation* in Chinul and a particular, and a somewhat heterodox, reading of the cardinal teaching of the *Four Noble Truths* as a pair of coupled dyadic relations. Overall, the thesis will seek to articulate the view of *respect* within a proposed *respect–response* ethical model; the complete elaboration of which will be outside the remit of the thesis, but whose outline will be provisionally sketched.

The problem of a post-structural ethic

The starting point of the thesis will be an exposition of the difficulties the post-structural position poses for ethics. The principle sources here will be: the works of Derrida and Levinas, including secondary sources (focusing on those that bring the two into dialogue)

and the authors who have examined the specifically ethical potential of the post-structural position. It is expected that Simon Critchley's work in this area will be central to the discussion here. The thesis will attempt to show that all of the efforts to address the ethical challenges of post-structural thought—from the Levinassian or Derridian side, or both—fall short in some way—often in requiring a de-radicalised reading of one or the other.

A syncretic solution

The solution proposed by the thesis will be drawn from a reading of Chinul—the 11th Century CE Korean Sōn master—and in particular his syncretic harmonisation of the *sudden / gradual* debate that he negotiated. It will be argued that the relation between the two: *sudden awakening* and *gradual cultivation*, that Chinul proposed, can be taken as a framework to place Levinas's position and that of Derrida's with respect to each other in a novel relation. In this move—in the mode of *respect*—Derrida's deconstructive movement maps onto the place taken by the *gradual cultivation* in Chinul's system, with *sudden awakening* mapping on to that of Levinas. The particularity of the relation between *sudden awakening* and *gradual cultivation* in Chinul—taking a geometrical metaphor—is seen to be 'orthogonal', representing the relation between the absolute and the relative. In taking this position the absolute is seen to stand outside of metaphysics and that of any structure—it is only the relative that is seen to pertain to the ontological and metaphysical.

A step towards respect.

The thesis will argue that it is via this 'orthogonal' relation of the absolute to the relative that can orient a syncretic relation between Derrida's deconstructive movement and Levinas's ethical relation, since the absolute apprehended here is phenomenologically

uniquely singular and the inescapable relation at the core of Levinas's notion of '*il y a*'. Therefore the relation between absolute and relative, and between Levinas and Derrida, the thesis will argue, offers a partial step towards a comprehensive ethic in that it offers an apodictic foundation or ground. However, this ground is also argued to be inescapably groundless as it is necessarily outside of the metaphysical and so not concerned by the movement of deconstruction. The thesis will argue that, it is through attending to the quality, the inherent paradox and implications of this apodictic *groundless-ground* that a relation-ethic notion of *respect* can be articulated.

A step towards response

It is admitted that a complete ethic needs to motivate ethical action in the relative normalistic domain and the articulation of a radical relation between Levinas and Derrida that the thesis will propose does not in itself offer a way forward in this regard. It is in facing this impasse that the thesis will draw upon a particular and heterodox interpretation of the *Four Noble Truths* model, as a coupled pair of dyads—*dukkha-tanhā* and *nibbāna-magga*. This will be then taken as a framework guiding the conception of a process model that links the absolute and relative in the syncretic positioning of Derrida and Levinas that the thesis proposes. Revealed through this mapping dialogue will be the place of action within a unified ethical process model. It will be argued that, phenomenologically speaking, action can only be articulated from the relative, but the effects of actions pertain directly to the apodictic or concrete—to the absolute in terms of a grounding to the actual. Hence it is seen to be through action that the absolute and relative become coupled in a form of feedback loop or spiral.

It is expected that this analysis will lead to the argument for a notion of *response* to be coupled with that of *respect* to give *respect–response* as a proposed ethical process model. The thesis will argue that this is a model which retains the radical perspectives of Levinas and Derrida and offers an ethic which holds the promise to be able to speak to the spiritual, religious, the political and to science.