

Derrida's Deconstruction As A Life-Affirming Strategy: A Theological Reflection

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이 글은 흔히 “해체”라는 말로 묘사되는 프랑스 철학자 데리다(Jacques Derrida)의 비평적 실천에 대한 한 신학적 숙고이다. 이 글에서 필자는 데리다의 “해체”가 세계 안에서의 인간 경험의 의미와 가치를 무시하고 있다는, 즉 “허무주의적”이라는 비판들에 주목하였다. 비평가들의 눈에, 데리다는 경험 세계를 형이상학의 언어 게임 안으로 사라지게 하는 것처럼 보인다. 말하자면, 해체주의 철학은 형이상학과 언어학 모두에서 지나치게 철학적인 것으로 보이며, 동시에 역사적, 즉 더욱 물리적 차원으로서의 이 세상적 삶을 초월하고 부인하는 것처럼 보인다. 이런 맥락에서 “해체”는 신학과 탈구조주의 사이에 다리를 놓고자 하는 모든 건설적 신학적 시도들에 장애가 되고 있는 것이 사실이다. 이 글에서 필자는 데리다의 해체주의 철학이 일종의 허무주의라고 말하는 것이 타당하지 않으며, 오히려 데리다의 “해체”에는 이 세상적 인 삶의 긍정의 목소리가 들려진다는 것을 보여주고자 시도했다. 데리다의 해체적 실천은 형이상학적 이원론, 존재론적 본질주의, 그리고 계급체제 또는 권위주의 등에 의해 지탱되는 모든 체제들을 해체시킴으로써 오히려 삶의 긍정을 선포한다. 따라서 데리다의 “해체”는 세계 안에서의 인간 삶의 존엄성과 가치의 향상을 향해 방향지워진 모든 신학적 시도들을 고무시킨다고 볼 수 있다. 이 글의 두 번째 단락, 즉 데리다의 “해체”에 대한 신학적 적용에서, 필자는 데리다의 “해체”가 시간과 영원, 내재와 초월 사이의 이원론적 경향을 극복하도록 도우면서 세계의 역사적 차원에 많이 주목하기 위한 길을 열고, 세계 안에서의 인간 삶의 관계적 측면을 강조한다는 점에 주목하였으며, 결론적으로 거기서 정치적, 경제적 의미에서의 불의, 사회적 소외와 배제와 같은 왜곡된 역사적 상황들을 변혁시키는 신학적 윤리의 함의들이 발견된다고 주장했다.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Différence, nihilism, poststructuralism,
Life-affirmation

I. Introduction

This essay is a theological reflection on the critical practice of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, which is often described as "Deconstruction." My reflection starts by pondering one of the frequently given criticisms to Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, that is, that it is guilty of negating human life in the world. An article entitled "A New Look at Lit Crit" that appeared in the June 22, 1981 issue of *Newsweek* explained the reasons why theologians had not seized upon deconstructive techniques and put them to work in their own discipline. According to the article's account, Derrida's deconstruction is (a) nihilistic -- it holds that human experience is altogether without meaning and value, and (de)construction is skeptical of all manifestoes on the meaning of life, and (b) atheistic -- it begins from the premise that God is dead and arrives at the conclusion that everything is permitted. In this paper, I am concerned with the criticism that "Derrida's deconstruction is nihilistic, disregarding the meaning and value of human experience in the world." Is it true that the deconstructive philosophy is skeptical of all manifestoes on the meaning and value of worldly life experience?

According to Walter Lowe, the aim of Derrida's deconstruction is to counter the notion that truth is something that we can grasp and control; and as an alternative to such a manipulative orientation, deconstruction generally opts for a "free play" in which nothing is grasped or held.¹⁾ Seriously misunderstood, Lowe's assumption might lead to

the conclusion that Derrida's deconstruction could be called a philosophy of uncertainty, for it sounds as if it says that there is no truth that we can grasp and control, and, finally, deconstruction searches for a 'free play' in which nothing is comprehended or maintained. Interestingly, Mark C. Taylor speaks about the impossibility of obtaining the certainty. He comments, "If modern philosophy begins with Descartes's restless search for certainty, it ends with the confession in this century of the impossibility of ever attaining the certainty for which we yearn."²⁾ Accordingly, at a glance, all that Derrida's deconstruction can guarantee to humanity is simply the future of uncertainty. Thus, the philosophy of the future of uncertainty implies something of uncertainty for the future of humanity, and, as a result, seems not to have much concern for the realm of worldly human life, its meaning, or value.

Meanwhile, it is true that Derrida's deconstructive approach has greatly depended upon the play of metaphysics and linguistics, which often makes the readers unbearably "uneasy and uncomfortable," especially because of the confusing nature of such a metaphysical and philosophical word play. Such linguistic and metaphysical confusion is to be said to originate from the deconstructionists' anti-empiricism, the attitude of not looking at the real world. In his book review of *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, Danny Yee attacks the world-evading atti-

1) Walter Lowe, "A Deconstruction Manifesto," *Journal of Religion* 66 (July 1986): p.330.

2) Mark C. Taylor, "Deconstruction: What's the Difference?," *Soundings* 66 (Winter 1983): pp.401-402.

tude of deconstructionists, commenting as follows:

This linguistic and metaphysical confusion is paralleled by a worrying anti-empirical streak. I don't suppose it would ever occur to some of these people [Writer's Note. Deconstruction writers] to look at the real world. Of course they probably don't accept that there is a real world and hold more or less extreme relativist positions, but they make no effort whatsoever to make their positions explicit, and certainly do not face up to the problems that come with such views.³⁾

To the eyes of critics, it seems that Derrida would have the empirical world disappear into the language play of metaphysics. The worldly experience, that is, human life in the world, seems not to have its positive place in the results of deconstructive practice or discussion of *différance*. That is to say, the deconstructive philosophy seems to be excessively philosophical, in both areas of metaphysics and linguistics, while transcending and negating this worldly life as a historical, or more physical, dimension.

As a result, the suspected worldly life-negating aspect of Derrida's deconstruction as described above appears to be one of the reasons why theologians have been so reluctant to seize upon deconstructive techniques and to put them in their own discipline. In fact, most of the influential theological works in the recent decades have been focused on the dimensions of the deity's immanence and the meaning and dignity of human life in the world. To their theologies, the center has been

3) Cited from <http://dannyreviews.com/h/A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader.html>.

refocused on human dignity, the meaning and value of human existence. Thus, the question of the degree to which a methodology refers to the historical dimensions of God and humanity has become a criterion for judging its theological significance and effectiveness. In this sense, the deconstruction's appearance of neglecting empirical, worldly life might be viewed as a barrier to all the theological attempts to construct a bridge between theology and poststructuralism.

Then, is it proper to say that Derrida's deconstructive philosophy is a kind of nihilism, promising just a future of uncertainty and negating the reality of worldly, empirical life? Is it justifiable for a number of theologians to have been careful not to introduce deconstructive techniques into their own theological concerns? In this discussion, in response to those questions, I want to say "No!" Rather, I intend to maintain that, in Derrida's deconstruction, I find the voice of a worldly life-affirmation, an antithesis of nihilism, and the idea that there is a "real world" as the place of human life experiences. As far as I understand, Derrida's deconstructive practice proclaims the affirmation of life through deconstructing all the systems supported by metaphysical dualism, ontological essentialism, hierarchy, or authoritarianism. For Derrida's case, even though it is a word derived from strongly philosophical thinking, deconstruction no longer resides in philosophy. Rather, it "launches" people's lives and their political attitudes, while engaging a social, political strategy, which is to be used in affirming the meaning and value of life in this historical world.

To achieve my goal in this essay, I have divided the remainder of

the discussion into two parts: in the first half, I will argue that Derrida's deconstructive philosophy is a life-affirming strategy. To support this position I will discuss how Derrida's deconstruction as a worldly life-affirming strategy deconstructs the dualistic concepts of metaphysical philosophy, opposes ontological essentialism, and displaces all pre-supposed principle or authority. In the second half, I will share a theological reflection, explaining how Derrida's deconstruction as a worldly life-affirming strategy can be theologically interpreted. Especially, the theological reflection is accompanied by the life-affirming theology of the liberation theologian, Elsa Tamez, whose work suggests a reconstructive examination of the doctrine of justification by faith. I find that Elsa Tamez's life-affirming theology reflects very well the theological insights, which can also be obtained when Derrida's life-affirming deconstructive thought is applied to theology.

II. Deconstructing Binary or Dualistic Systems

First of all, I find the life-affirming aspect in Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, when it seeks to deconstruct the binary structures or dualistic claims, seen to characterize metaphysics which have been displacing participation in the world in favor of otherworldly constructions. In this sense, I think that James J. Dicenso is quite right, when he writes that "Derrida and theological followers such as Mark C. Taylor point out that from the deconstruction of metaphysical structures there follows an affirmation of life that is the antithesis of nihilism."⁴) In

my view, the more the dualistic or binary systems of traditional metaphysics collapses, the more positively the historical dimension of life is emphasized and the meaning and value of worldly life experience is acknowledged.

Then, how does Derrida's deconstructive philosophy deconstruct the binary or dualistic systems of metaphysical thoughts? At first, it is instantly explained by the basic method of deconstruction: find a binary opposition; show how each term, rather than being polar opposite of its paired term, is actually part of it; then, the structure or opposition which kept them apart collapses. Ultimately, we can't tell which is which, and the idea of binary opposites loses meaning. The reason why the method is called "Deconstruction" is that it is a combination of construction and destruction. We don't simply construct new system of binaries, nor do we destroy the old system; rather, we deconstruct the old system by showing how its basic units of such structuration (binary pairs and the rules for their combination) contradict their own logic.

Of course, the key concept in understanding of how Derrida's deconstructive strategy deconstructs the dualism of metaphysical traditions is the term *diff rance*. That is, *diff rance* is the word which Derrida has coined that is a pun based on two French words meaning "to differ" and "to defer." According to Derrida, Western philosophers have been mistaken in their belief that being is presence, sameness, identity, essence, representing clear and distinct ideas, etc. Thus, Derrida combines the senses of *diff rance* as temporization (defer) and of *diff rance* as

4) James J. Dicenso, "Deconstruction and the Philosophy of Religion: World Affirmation and Critique," *Philosophy of Religion* 31 (1992): p.37.

spacing (unlike, distinction between proximate things)⁵⁾ to make the point that the idea of "being" and/or "presence" that has been so central to Western culture is not so authoritative. In this vein, Derrida discusses *diff rance* as the absence of presence, as follows:

If *diff rance* is what makes possible the presentation of being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone. Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point ... Already we have had to delineate that *diff rance* is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not, that is, everything; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence.⁶⁾

According to this passage, *diff rance* is not graspable as a determinable being, concept, or point of reference. Its realm is non-cognitive in the sense that it cannot be fully captured or described by means of any set of concepts or by any logical system which makes objects "present" to the mind. *Diff rance* is not a present being; reality is *diff rance*, not presence. Absence precedes (or is older than) presence. Then, what does Derrida's *diff rance* as absence of presence intend to say? It is to say that there are no identities, no self-contained presences, no fixed, settled meanings at the level of *diff rance*. There is no order of

5) Jacques Derrida, "*Diff rance*," in *A Derrida Reader - Between the Blinds*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p.62.

6) Jacques Derrida, "*Diff rance*," in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.6.

truth at a certain precise point. Therefore, the result of Derrida's deconstructive philosophy denies any dualistic pairs of concepts, permanently fixed, based on traditional, metaphysical structures.

Also, the process of *différance* deconstructs the dualism of the time and the eternal, often projected by metaphysical thoughts. The absence of presence, according to Mark J. Taylor, broadens the gap through which the space of time appears. Time not only transpires "in" space, but space "indwells" time. The spacing of time creates a hole that can never be completely filled and engenders a desire that cannot be totally satisfied. For Taylor, time is ceaseless transition, perpetual motion, and constant movement. "Due to the everlasting interplay of identity and difference and of presence and absence, the present is *present not as total presence, but as trace*. Rather than a *nunc stans*, time is ceaseless transition, perpetual motion, and constant movement (*momentum*)."⁷⁾ Therefore, in the process of *différance*, the dualism of the time and the eternal also collapses.

Ultimately, the aspect of deconstructing the dualistic or binary systems of metaphysics culminates in Derrida's concept of the trace. The trace which is important to Derrida's thought is the after-effect of *différance*. Thus, the concept of the trace is inseparable from the concept of *différance*. Derrida defines the trace as follows:

This trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing. The outside, "spacial" and "objective" exteriority which we

7) Mark C. Taylor, *Erring* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.50.

believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the grammé, without difference as temporization, without the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship to death as the concrete structure of the living present.⁸⁾

The trace is the mark of the future and the past in a present moment which is neither. And the idea of our present (a *meaning*-full present) depends on this trace. Derrida points out that all metaphysical dualism such as logocentrism,⁹⁾ putting speech over writing, and onto-theology etc., after all, are attempts to reduce the trace. Derrida writes,

All dualism, all theories of the immortality of the soul or of the spirit, as well as all monisms, spiritualist or materialist, dialectical or vulgar, are the unique theme of a metaphysics whose entire history was compelled to strive toward the reduction of the trace. The subordination of the trace to the full presence summed up in the logos, the humbling of writing beneath a speech dreaming its plenitude, such are the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without difference. ...¹⁰⁾

In conclusion, as the above discussions on the method of decon-

8) Jaques Derrida, "Of Grammatology," in Peggy Kamuf, ed. *A Derrida Reader - Between the Blinds* (New York Columbia Press, 1991), pp.42-43.

9) Derrida urged in a recent interview, "One must not forget this huge fact that the beginnings of deconstruction were a critique of logocentrism." Walter Lowe, "A Deconstruction Manifesto," p.330.

10) Derrida, "Of Grammatology," in *A Derrida Reader - Between the Blinds*, p.43.

struction, *différance*, and the concept of 'trace' etc. show that Derrida's deconstructive philosophy tends to deconstruct all kinds of binary or dualistic concepts of metaphysics. At the same time, it supports the importance of the historical dimension of human life in the world, through deconstructing dualistic or binary systems of the Western metaphysical philosophy which have been neglecting the meaning and value of life experiences in the world.

III. An Existential Approach to Meaning and Value of Life

In the previous section, I argued that Derrida's deconstructive philosophy is affirming worldly life in the world, through deconstructing dualistic systems of the Western metaphysical philosophy. Now, I find the deconstructive practice's life-affirming aspect in its existential approach to the meaning and value of worldly life. Here, my use of the word existential does not mean the notion that human being is the center of acting and deciding in crisis or tension, and the initiative in deciding for better or worse rests always and entirely upon each individual person. Rather, with the expression of the existential approach to human life, I intend to say that the meaning and value of human life rest not on the essence or nature of human being, but on the human existence, itself, especially placed within the concrete, historical world.

I think that Derrida's deconstructive philosophy can support an existential approach to the meaning of life, especially in the sense that it emphasizes the concrete, historical and contingent of individual expe-

rience, while denying essentialism or dependence on any universal principle. For example, Derrida's deconstruction declines the structuralist assumption that structural principles are essences, that is, that there are universal structural principles of language which exist 'before' the incidence of language. According to the deconstructive thinking, all 'principles' of existence (i.e., of experience) are historically situated and are structured by the interplay of individual experience and institutional force, through the language, symbols, environment, exclusions and oppositions of the moment and of the previous moments through which this one is constructed. Structures are historical, temporary, contingent, operating through differentiation and displacement. As John Lye properly points out, this emphasis on the concrete, historical and contingent in opposition to the eternalities of essence reveals one of deconstruction's filiations with existentialism.¹¹⁾ Deconstruction prefers existence, conditioned by the concrete, historical, and contingent, to essence as an universal structural principle.

Here, as I mentioned above, I can say that the collapse of the dualistic systems leads to the emphasis upon historical dimensions. According to Derrida, the presentation of any object is the result of the process of *différance* because we only experience or identify particular objects in their differing from other things. The object is only known and articulated by being different, and hence the presentation

11) John Lye, "Deconstruction: Some Assumptions," 3. Recited from Derek Attridge, "Singularities, Responsibilities: Derrida, Deconstruction and Literary Criticism" in *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Destructive Writing*, ed. by Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch, pp.109-110.

of things is never immediate, but is in some sense deferred. Reciprocally, the process of *différance* does not present itself directly, but is revealed by the deconstruction of concepts related to presence.¹²⁾ Therefore, for Derrida, the collapse of the binary systems of the temporal and eternal opens the horizontal dimension of history. Derrida says, "we will designate as *différance* the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted 'historically' as a weave of differences."¹³⁾ Thus, for him, "*différance* is no more static than it is genetic, no more structural than historical."¹⁴⁾ As John Lye examines, "the point here is that history is built in, and is built as a network of relations, that is differences, displacements, traces, deferrals. Therefore, *différance* makes being and meaning radically historical."¹⁵⁾

Moreover, although the realm of *différance* is non-cognitive, it never occurs without cognitive knowledge, that is, the realm of presence. This is so because our contact with it in human experience, our involvement with it through language, always takes place by means of concepts or predication. And this is simply to say that all knowledge is "contextual" in the sense that the relations of an object in any system of objects or meanings are always changing (differing); hence, meaning (i.e., identity) is continually being postponed (i.e., deferred). Therefore, the meaning of life includes spacial and temporal aspects. The reality of

12) Dencso, "Deconstruction and the philosophy of religion," p.32.

13) Derrida, "*Différance*," in *A Derrida Reader - Between the Blinds*, p.65.

14) Ibid.

15) John Lye, "*Différance*," 2-3. Class Material - EMGL 4F70 *Contemporary Literary Theory*. Brock University, 1996. From <http://www.brocku.ca/english/4F70/diff.html>.

what meaning is, then opens up to the radical question regarding all claims for stability of identity or truth; at the same time, it extends the range of meaning and being, making the world into a network of meanings.

In understanding the concept of *différance* as providing with a historical meaning, the word 'play' also seems important. It means something very similar to what the word 'articulation' means. Something is articulated if it is jointed. Something that is jointed is attached to something, but in such a way that it has a freedom of movement and so can open up the possibility of manipulation, of working with and in the world. Therefore, play or articulation, opens up time and space as the horizontal dimension of history. Deconstruction produces a movement of "play" that can not be contained by the controlling oppositions, that is, the dualistic systems of metaphysical thought.

Also, in the practice of deconstruction strategy, especially, through the play of deferral and differences, meaning is searched for in an existential way. According to Derrida, meaning is always deferred, always provisional, always incomplete. The term *différance*, as a graphic example, continually shifts its own meaning from deferral to difference. That is to say, not allowing any settling of either one meaning or the other for itself, it demands an exploration of meaning through deferral and differences that exist in the writings of a text. The meaning of "differ" and "defer," at the same time, is, as John Lye examines, that what we take to be meaning is a shifting field of relations in which there is no stable point, in which dynamic opposing meanings may be present

simultaneously, in which the meaning is textually modulated in an interwoven play of texts. Meaning circulates, it is always meaning by difference, by being other.¹⁶⁾

Lastly, Derrida re-emphasizes the point that meaning is not in the signifier itself, but that it only exists in a network, in relation to other things. Derrida states,

The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences.¹⁷⁾

Mark C. Taylor also, in his examination of deconstruction's difference, points out the relationality of signs. "The determinate identity of any sign is a function of its relation to otherness. Signs, in other words, are throughly differential and *radically relational*. Apart from its difference from other signs, a particular signifier is completely indeterminate and utterly unintelligible."¹⁸⁾ Thus the concept of the Other which is inscribed through difference is central to Derrida's deconstructive thought and emphasizes the aspect of existential meaning of human life in the world: we cannot exist without the Other. The Other is the existence which is not us, but that through which we are constituted. As

16) Lye, "Deconstruction: Some Assumptions," 3.

17) Derrida, "*Différance*," p.63.

18) Taylor, "Deconstruction: What's the Difference?," p.398.

James J. Dicenso emphasizes, Derrida argues that meaning occurs in a relation, in an engagement between persons or between texts and contextually-located persons.¹⁹⁾

In summary, Derrida's deconstruction as a life-affirming strategy approaches to the meaning and value of life, in a existential way, preferring existence, conditioned by the concrete, historical, and contingent, to essence as an universal structural principle. Therefore, at the heart of existence is *diff' rance*, not essence. As discussed in the previous section (of *deconstructing dualism of metaphysics*), without differing, no time and space; if time and space are constituted through differing/deferring, there are no absolute identities, and there is no simple and absolute identity with itself. No ultimate 'truth' can be, and be itself, nor can it be outside of time and space, and hence beyond contingency. Any 'truth' exists, then, only contingently, and relationally, through *diff' rance*. Before essence, comes existence, the conditionality of space and time. This is the existential aspect of Derrida's deconstruction philosophy, affirming the historical dimension of human life in the world.

IV. Transforming the World through Displacing a Presupposed Principle or Authority

Among those who negatively respond to Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, some raise a criticism, that Derrida's deconstruction supports no political agenda because, in the end, everything is left exactly as

19) Dicenso, "Deconstruction and the philosophy of religion," p.31.

it was. Their voice sounds like those who say that the point of Derrida's deconstruction is not to change the world but to get a better look at it, reminding us of the episode that Marx criticized his fellow philosophers just for having interpreted the world instead of trying to change it. Is it true that Derrida's deconstruction has no concern for the distorted, oppressed realities of the world? Does not the result of the deconstructive strategy have any political significance?

In fact, in the beginning of his career, Derrida frustrated all attempts to read a simple political program into deconstruction. He declared himself to be a man of the left but refused to elaborate, leaving more orthodox thinkers to wonder whether deconstruction reflected anything more than "libertarian pessimism," as the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton once charged. But, although the history of Derrida's writings shows a transition of his interest in political situation, we can not escape the conclusion that Derrida was very concerned with resistance and change. From the beginning, Derrida had strong interest in the political situation. According to John Caputo, having felt the sting of National Socialism as a Jew growing up in colonial Algeria during World War II, Derrida had been, from the start, acutely sensitive to the questions of injustice, oppression, and exclusion in a post-World War II Europe to which the dogmatic Marxists were singularly blind.²⁰⁾

In my view, Derrida's deconstructive philosophy becomes a social, political strategy to be used in affirming life in the world and transforming distorted living conditions, particularly when it is understood

20) John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp.126-127.

to displace presupposed world-views or authoritarian order. It becomes a way of reading the meaning and value of human lives in the world in a transforming, liberating way.

First of all, as a strategy for transforming the world, socially and politically, deconstruction, besides its necessity to change, holds its continuing creativity, remaining open to the future. The meaning of life should be real and be open to the future endlessly. In this sense, James J. Diconso properly interprets deconstruction in a world transforming way, when he says, "Meaning occurs in the relation between text and interpretive praxis. Meaning is itself a process that can not be finalized." "Deconstruction embraces chance and open-endedness as intrinsic to the experience of self and world."²¹⁾ Derrida's deconstructive style of reading structure and meaning of a text challenges the idea that a text has an unchanging, unified meaning. A text is open to multiple of meanings. Through deconstruction and *diff rance*, Derrida allows for the text to be "opened" and exposed to numerous meanings. Therefore, we can say that anyone attempting to find a single, correct meaning in a text is simply imprisoned by that structure of thought that would oppose two readings and declare one to be right and not wrong, correct rather than incorrect.

Meaning is open to the future which is to be lived by every self and world. Here, language acquires its meaning not just from its formal system, but from its place in the social struggle over meanings. Accordingly, we can say that Derrida's deconstructive philosophy sup-

21) Diconso, "Deconstruction and the philosophy of religion," p.34.

ports a way of political struggle. Here, another discussion of the concept of *diff rance* is decisively meaningful. Derrida's *diff rance* is the continuous production of significance through displacement. The process, as we discussed above, leads to rejection of any authoritarian principle or claim. "All writing, perhaps all language, puts off, differs from and in a sense rejects, any meaningful reference to a reality beyond. The result is ultimately a universe where there exists nothing but the text, and the text itself is eternally open. Again, this time in a sharper manner, closure is impossible."²²⁾

Deconstruction also negates any hierarchical presupposition which leads to oppressing the lives in the world. In the case of the binaries signifier/signified, the thing signified has traditionally been understood as the more primary element. In the case of speech/writing, speech is traditionally viewed as the truer vehicle of communication, and so forth. Such hierarchies result solely from traditional ontological presuppositions, and to deconstruct the binary opposition, for Derrida, as a result, is to overturn the hierarchical presupposition. Derrida is making "problematic the hierarchic principle that permits us to privilege one over the other."²³⁾ In the same context, Derrida, according to Spivak, defines deconstruction as "the deconstruction of the founding concepts of the Western historical narrative." Therefore, *diff rance* is the motor as the deferral of violence through representation allows for

22) William J. Gavin, "James and Deconstruction," *Soundings* 68 No. 4 (Winter 1985): p.538.

23) Louis Mackey, "Slouching Toward Bethlehem: Deconstructive Strategies in Theology," *Anglican Theological Review* 65 (July 1983): p.262.

all sorts of institutional development, transformation, and revolution.

In conclusion, deconstruction's openness to meaning, continuous production of significance through displacement, and negation of hierarchical systems is affirmative of the multiplicity, the paradoxes, the richness and vibrancy, of our life in the world, and thus, transforming all the life-negating conditions of the world. Going one more step, Derrida's deconstruction becomes a strategy for the marginalized to fight against injustice in the world. It might lend itself to a political agenda in the sense that world views are almost, by [deconstructionist] definition, oppressive since they privilege some (literal) meanings and marginalize others; thus, deconstruction becomes the method for rejecting and debunking world views. Conversely, it also allows those views, readings, and alternative meanings which have usually belonged to minority groups and have often been marginalized to reclaim their rightful place in the market place of ideas.²⁴⁾ Now, margins are not peripheral, but central.²⁵⁾ As Taylor writes, "with the realization of the total reciprocity of subjects, the entire foundation of the economy of domination crumbles."²⁶⁾

24) Brendan Sweetman, Postmodernism, "Derrida, and Difference - A Critique," *International Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 39., no. 1. (March 1999): pp.3-4.

25) Lye, "Différance," p.3.

26) Taylor, *Erring*, p.134.

V. A Theological Reflection on Derrida's Deconstruction as a Life-affirming strategy

In most scholarly studies today, the focal point of all the questions seems to be the issue of human beings. In fact, all the researches and all the human activities are, directed in their ultimate goals, to humanity, to enhancing the happiness of human beings and to magnifying the meaning and value of human life. In the same way, the search for full meaning and value of human life has been among of the primary goals of most theological works. In this vein, it is interesting to hear how the Asian womanist theologian Hyun-kyung Chung talks about judging whether a theology is good theology or bad theology. Prof. Chung believes that the way to test a "good" theology is to see if it untangles Third World women's "*han*" and liberates them from bondage by giving a life-giving power that empowers them to full humanity. According to Chung, if a theology has a life-giving power for Korean women and empowers us to grow in our full humanity, then it is a 'good' theology. A 'bad' theology, however, makes Third World women die inside and wither away in our everyday bodily and spiritual life.²⁷⁾ Therefore, a good theology should have concern for the meaning and value of human lives, and, ultimately, should strive for the betterment of the conditions of human lives.

Considered within the context discussed in the previous paragraph,

27) Hyun-kyung Chung, "Han-pu-ri: Doing Theology From Korean Women's Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 4 (January 1988): p.36.

as a life-affirming strategy, Derrida's deconstruction suggests a desirable direction on which a good theology has to take. In the way that Derrida's deconstruction becomes a worldly life-affirming strategy, the features of deconstructing binary or dualistic systems, of an existential approach to the meaning and value of life, and of transforming the worldly context through replacing authoritative structure might have life-affirming insights in theology. Especially, in the liberation theology of Latin America, I can find a theological version of the life-affirming aspect of Derrida's deconstruction in the work of Elsa Tamez through her reconstructive examination of the doctrine of justification by faith.²⁸⁾ Tamez's critical, contextual, reconstructive interpretation of the doctrine of justification by faith is a theological affirmation of life.

Then, speaking more concretely, how can Derrida's deconstruction as a life-affirming strategy be understood in theological terms? First of all, the deconstruction's aspect of denying binary or dualistic systems of metaphysics implies much for theology. Today, one of the tasks of theology is to overcome the dualistic trend of making an unconquerable distance between the temporal and the eternal, the immanent and the transcendent, etc., especially when such dualistic systems are no longer meaningful for the lives of people. In fact, the dualistic trend in theology has often produced an abyss between doctrine and reality, very often disregarding the historical dimension in the doctrine of Christian life, while placing too much emphasis on the transcendental or the eternal. For example, the history of Christianity witnesses that the ker-

28) Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

ymatic Christology, an ideology of the established Church, was forced on Jesus in order to make him support the Church institution. It has greatly served as an ideology to preserve the Church by repeating an ecclesiastical understanding of Jesus' death, but at the cost of silencing Jesus himself. It dehistoricized the events of the death of Jesus and his resurrection, made them abstract, and distorted them as an object of belief only with regard to the other world. In this vein, it is theologically significant that the process of *diff rance* in Derrida's deconstruction as a life-giving strategy denies any dualistic pairs of concepts, permanently fixed, based on traditional, metaphysical structures: i.e., the time and the eternal, logocentrism, putting speech over writing, and onto-theology etc.

Secondly, for Derrida, the collapse of the binary systems of the temporal and eternal opens the way for placing much attention on the historical dimension of the world. Derrida's deconstructive philosophy supports an existential approach to the meaning and value of the human life in the world, especially in the sense that it emphasizes the concrete, historical and contingent of individual experience, while denying essentialism or dependence on any universal principle. Theologically understood, Derrida's deconstruction's emphasis upon the human existence challenges theology to search for the meaning and value of life, especially considering spacial and temporal aspects. Also, radically questioning all claims for the stability of identity or truth, it extends the range of meaning and being, making the world into a network of meanings. That is, meaning and value of life is positively sought within

the history. Theologically speaking, I think, being historical is essential to human beings, although it does not mean that the significance of human existence is restricted to this temporal history.

Therefore, the existential aspect of Derrida's deconstruction as I discussed above, is very different from the ontological existentialism as shown in the theology of Paul Tillich. Of course, Tillich's thought helps Christian people to find the meaning of their existence in the modern culture and society. But the nature of his thinking is of a philosophical and ontological nature, especially in the sense that his approach to the meaning of human beings is found in the individual and inner nature. The physical world, for Tillich, is lost in his search for existential significance of any historical reality. What Tillich calls the ultimate ground and power of every historical situation could be a "superhistorical reality," which makes his philosophical existentialism a transcendentalism. In the mere transcendentalism which devalues history altogether, the meaning of being becomes subject to radical subjectivism, and the category of history is replaced by the one of historicity. Therefore, Tillich remains within the onto-theological tradition of the West and, in particular, "seems to be radically unhistorical, despite its emphasis on the kairos, since that system remains in a dynamic tension between a manifold of polar opposites which apparently never begin or end."²⁹)

Furthermore, Derrida's deconstructive thought emphasizes the aspect of relational meaning of human life in the world: we cannot exist with-

29) Max A. Myers, "Toward What Is Religious Thinking Underway?," *Deconstruction and Theology*, edited by Thomas Altizer (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p.137.

out the Other. A human being is a relational being, and the meaning and value of human life is radically relational. The aspect of relationality or mutuality in Derrida's deconstruction can be applied to a newly rising interest in theology: the human being is regarded as a relational being in modern theological discussions. The human being, before God, is never without any relation to this world, this earthly history. As E. T. Charry expresses, "Christians are embedded in a highly structured social framework which orients them in relation to God, the natural world, and other people."³⁰ The formation of Christian character happens in a social or communal context. Christian piety is interpersonal and social as well as directed heavenward, Godward. As a result, religious consciousness and behaviors of a Christian always must have social, ethical implications.

The life-affirming theology of the liberation theologian, Elsa Tamez, also shows an existential way of understanding the meaning and value of life in the world. In Elsa Tamez's reconstructive examination of the doctrine of justification by faith, the starting point is the context of Latin America today, i.e. the reality of oppression, marginalization, exclusion, poverty, struggle, and outcries of hunger, insignificance, or even death. Tamez's reconstruction by faith challenges people to recover or rediscover dimensions relevant for the reality of poverty and struggle. Thus, it negates a doctrinal definition of justification by faith which is no more meaningful, because of its great distance from the reality of human existence. In this vein, Tamez criticizes the usual in-

30) E. T. Charry, "The Moral Function of Doctrine," *Theology Today* 49 (April 1992): p.45.

terpretation of justification by faith in Latin America and its negative consequences for the current process of liberation. Tamez's presupposition is that the relevance of the question of justification by faith in Latin America must point to "the life experience and practice of Christians, churches, and poor people in general."³¹) But the usual understanding of the doctrine, such as forgiveness of sins, liberation from guilt, and reconciliation with God has been formed in an excessively individual, abstract, and generic way. It also disregards the issue of forgiveness of sin among human beings in the historical situations of conflict and struggle, i.e. the issue of relationships between human beings and the rest of the world. Furthermore, the principle of the absolute initiative and participation of God in the salvation of the human being invalidates the principle of active human participation in the work of God. As a result, "individualism, subjectivism, universalism, passivity, and general misinterpretations of the doctrine of justification by faith have contributed to the confusion of the meaning and application of the doctrine."³²) Therefore, the interpretation of justification by faith which is content with an *ahistorical* reconciliation with God and its abstract and individualistic meaning, and thus disconnected from the reality, is neither proper nor meaningful to the people in the situation of dehumanization in Latin America. Rather, it promotes the spiritualization or internalization of sin. Similarly, Derrida's deconstructive strategy's existential approach leads to the historical dimension with the same emphasis. As, for Derrida, the collapse of the dualistic or binary

31) Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace*, p.19.

32) Tamez, p.25.

systems of traditional metaphysics opens the historical dimension of human lives. That is, the more the traditional, abstract, dualistic formula of the doctrine of justification by faith collapses in liberation theology, the more positively the worldly dimension and its implications are recovered.

Elsa Tamez believes that any abstract speech about justification by faith or any universal discourse, without taking into account the particularity from which it is pronounced is no longer necessary. Especially, in interpreting the Bible, Tamez's focus on the particular context of injustice, marginalization, and exclusion in political, economic sense is the same existential approach, which is found in Derrida's deconstruction. As theologians, we are always under the temptation to abstract general ideas from this worldly history, and to attempt the construction of a rational system; but in the end, we are always driven back to the concrete history and its personal texture. To be a Christian means to live radically in the historical world.

Lastly, Derrida's deconstruction as a life-affirming strategy plays its role in transforming the worldly situations, as it reads the meaning and value of human lives in its emphasis upon deconstructive work's creative openness to the future, a multiplicity of meaning, and a fight against presupposed hierarchies. In the recent theological streams, which prefer to talk about the life-giving power, especially in the work of the Holy Spirit, the relations between God and humanity and between a human being and his or her fellow creatures are, in their natures, not fixed in a disposition, but transforming themselves always

and newly. A human being in a certain relationship can never be a fixed or closed being. He or she is called to do something good in order to transform and renew any present, distasteful situation among created beings, and between the world of creation and God. He or she is responsible for the future of the relations in which he or she is engaged, ultimately for the future of history. For example, the image of God reflected in humanity is not something unchangeable, some fixed (*substantia*), but rather an eschatological hope to which human beings have to look forward. He or she is responsible for the worldly history and should work in order to transform it continually according to God's plan. Within this understanding, the role of theology as a life-affirming strategy should be focused on transforming the distorted conditions of the world, continually opposing social, economic, political evils, as Derrida's deconstructive philosophy becomes a social, political strategy to be used in affirming and transforming life in the world, through adapting the idea of displacing presupposed world-view or authoritarian order.

Elsa Tamez's life-affirming theology becomes a world-transforming strategy, having a vision of making human lives fully meaningful in the end. Tamez declares that the reality of injustice and dehumanization in Latin America provides an impetus toward contextualizing the doctrine of justification by faith beginning with the reality of poverty and struggle etc., and challenges people to recover or rediscover through the existential approach the dimensions relevant for that reality. The challenging visions are, as Elsa Tamez points out, the dignity of the

human being, and the possibility and the necessity of human liberation, which must be affirmed as vital and especially pertinent in the situation of injustice, marginalization, and exclusion, especially in a political, economic sense. In order that the present life as the real life for real person is to be affirmed, "the means of obtaining basic necessities, a sense of human dignity, and the meaningfulness of life must go together."³³⁾ For Tamez, "Life as it now exists must be touched and transformed on the concrete plane of life experience and praxis."³⁴⁾ In this sense, liberation theology itself is a life-affirming strategy, as it tries to re-define Christian existence, and to re-new it, rather than to explain and define it, so that, ultimately, the people in Latin America as well as in other parts of the works can fight against the present system of the disordered and distorted. It challenges the Christian people to transform the fundamental message of Christianity into the ideology of the political and social liberation. According to liberation theology, Christian's behavior of faith should be understood in the text of political power-relations or acts of participation into transforming social, political organizations. The liberating deconstruction's objective field is the context as now, its indispensable subject is the excluded, its innovative way is a liberating dynamics, and its ultimate goal is the affirmation of life. Within this strategy, according to Elsa Tamez, the doctrine of justification by faith must be the good news for the excluded, by moving from doctrinal definition to contextual application.

Elsa Tamez interprets that "the act of justification by faith makes

33) Elsa Tamez, p.40.

34) Ibid., p.42.

men or women as subjects of their own history."³⁵) And the fact of the justified person's power as subject of his or her own history means that 'the justified has the power to transgress every law that is not at the service of the production and defense of the real life of all,' 'the sovereignty of God sustains the revelation of the justice of God for all and legitimates the sovereignty of the human being,' and 'God defends the sovereignty of the oppressed.' For Elsa Tamez to whom to speak of redemption using the language of sacrifice seems nothing meaningful in the present text, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a whole must be understood as the end of human sacrifices and of the laws that kills people. In a word, Elsa Tamez understand the role of theology not as a means of negating life, but as a power of affirming it, through replacing all hierarchical presuppositions and systems that kill lives in the world. "All people have the right to live with dignity as subjects, because life is a gift of God."³⁶)

VI. Conclusion

Derrida's deconstructive discourse is a life-affirming message to the humanity. His deconstructive thinking helps us to find the meaning of a text, that is, of the human life in the world.³⁷) Above all, it becomes

35) *Ibid.*, p.141.

36) *Ibid.*, p.165.

37) Here, I have to mention that, in reflecting on Derrida's deconstruction, I regard the world and that which is the worldly as one of texts. Derrida's thesis is not restricted to books or to art works, for texts may consist of any set of ever-changing

a life-affirming strategy, in its overcoming dualism of metaphysics, its existential approach to the meaning and value of life, and its message of transforming social, political situations. Therefore, James J. Dicenso is quite right, when he states that, from Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysical structures follows an affirmation of life which is the antithesis of nihilism.³⁸⁾ As the professor John Lye points out in the material for his class, "deconstruction is not a hymn to indeterminacy, or a life-imprisonment within language, or a denial of history, rather, reference, mimesis, context, historicity, are among the most repeatedly emphasized and carefully scrutinized topics in Derrida's writing."³⁹⁾ The passage, the same text as above, concludes, "the ethical and the political are not avoided by deconstruction, are implicated at every step."⁴⁰⁾ So, there is found an agreement on the fact that Derrida's deconstruction is resolutely historical, and inescapably political. Deconstruction is not nihilistic, but affirming human life in the world. As Louis Mackey maintains, "it is neither a device of demolition nor a counsel of despair."⁴¹⁾ It supports all the efforts to restore the meaning and value of life in the world.

Theologically reflected, the worldly life-affirming aspect of Derrida's deconstruction has a crucial direction toward which a good theology

meanings. Hence, the world and almost any object or combination of objects in it may be regarded as a "text."

38) Dicenso, "Deconstruction and the philosophy of religion," p.29.

39) Lye, "Deconstruction: Some Assumptions," p.1.

40) Ibid.

41) Louis Mackey, "Slouching Toward Bethlehem: Deconstructive Strategies in England," *Anglican Theological Review* 65 (July 1983): p.255.

should follow. It challenges theology to work against traditional dualisms of the sacred and the secular, the eternal and the temporal etc., which are no longer meaningful to human lives, to make the place of doing theology the historical context in which people are exploited and suffering, and to fight against old systems of hierarchies which have threatened the lives of humanity. Ultimately, it challenges theology to make its task the recovery of meaning and value of human lives and to make its ultimate vision the affirmation of life.

Also, a theological counterpart of Derrida's deconstruction in the liberation theology, can be found especially in the Elsa Tamez's critical, contextual, reconstructive interpretation of justification by faith as an affirmation of life. By reinterpreting theology on justification by faith, Tamez follows the dynamic process of the following three steps: first, to criticize the usual, unmeaningful understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith, second, to find challenges in the hopeless situation as a context which the people in Latin America are facing, and third, to reconstruct a new theology of justification by faith as an affirmation of life. In a word, a true theology should have a life-affirming strategy. Derrida's deconstruction offers much to encourage all the theological attempts directed to the improvement of the dignity and value of human lives in the world.

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