



# Ueda Shizuteru on Language and its Confrontation with the Derridean World

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Received: 18 March 2022 / Revised: 17 June 2022 / Accepted: 22 June 2022 /  
Published online: 26 July 2022

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## Abstract

The Derridean standpoint has made it challenging for philosophy to affirm a non-dualistic view of the world. If signification is a process where linguistic signs are always postponed or in deferment, then it is impossible to cultivate experiences without recurring to metaphysical thought. However, third generation Kyoto School thinker, Ueda Shizuteru, complicates this viewpoint. What Ueda describes as “exiting of language and exiting into language” is the dynamic movement of Zen experience that instantiates how language can be torn through and resurrected. As a reversal of Derrida who prizes linguistic signs over experience, Ueda’s view of Zen seeks to set limits to language without denying its inherent existence by clarifying how humans live in a two-fold world of the metaphysical and non-metaphysical. In order to make the latter visible, however, Ueda speaks of how absolute silence operates as a negation of Being, that which brings forth the world of infinite nothing, accompanied by an infinite stillness and openness that is undisturbed by the utterance of words. And yet the implications of Derrida’s method of critique are something Zen must also confront. Since human experience cannot avoid the world of metaphysics by virtue of existing as signs inscribed in the historical context, Zen must ethically examine the repressiveness of its inherited linguistic structure in the return to the world of signs. In the attempt to dispel this particular tension between Derrida and Ueda, this article, as a concluding point, will close the gap between their view of language and freedom by demonstrating how the compassionate vow of the bodhisattva can interrupt the problems of exclusion and marginalization brought on by linguistic production.

**Keywords** Ueda Shizuteru · Zen experience · Jacques Derrida · Signification · Language

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## 1 Introduction: The Zen Approach to the Derridean Problem

It is well known that Jacques Derrida's seminal work, *Of Grammatology*, poses a significant problem for the view of language that presumes a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified. Derrida's notion of *différance*, which denies any fixed and privileged primary meaning inherent to signs themselves, represents an attack on language as a self-enclosed system of signification. In fact, Derrida, who takes up Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, argues that language is a play of semantic differences that form a web of meaning that is forever "deferred" or postponed through an endless chain of signifiers, and not a system of distinct regulated signs corresponding to objects in the world. What the traditional account of language overlooks then is how words, meanings, and signs can only be defined and understood through an appeal to other words, meanings, and signs—particularly through those which are opposite or different from them. The implications of this view of language are not confined to the literary aspects of textual interpretation, however: since the world itself is a form of textuality, Derrida maintains that the entire history of Western philosophy from Plato onward is also the target of his critique, because of its profound desire for an immediate access of meaning. According to Derrida, Western philosophy is the history of a metaphysics of presence, where there is a privileging of presence over absence, that which disguises how one side within an oppositional set is championed while the other side is ignored or marginalized.

What makes Derrida's account of language significant for philosophy, and the philosophy of religion in particular, is that such a view is generally construed as an assault on the metaphysical tendencies of religious thought and practices. While Derrida's approach to language resembles negative theology in that it seeks to unmask the tacit metaphysics of discursive thought without recurring to a transcendental signified, Derrida himself remarks that forcing such a parallel can go too far. As Derrida (1992) says, "No, what I write is not 'negative theology' in the measure to which 'negative theology' seems to reserve, beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being" (p. 77). Nonetheless, Derrida's view of language and its interventions within the philosophy of religion does open up avenues for religious reflection within the claim that "creativity, possibility, and fruitfulness are more religiously significant characteristics than are determinacy and hierarchical structuring" (Dicenso, 1992, p. 35) precisely because "deconstruction embraces chance and open-endedness as intrinsic to the experience to self and world" (Dicenso, 1992, p. 34). In other words, the true value of overturning metaphysics is that it allows for a life-affirming religiosity.

We can share this same sentiment of life-affirming religiosity within the context of Zen Buddhism. The Derridean world does in fact make room for Zen experience because it is coterminous with it. The compatibility between Derrida and Zen, as contemporary Buddhist philosopher David Loy reminds us, rests on Derrida's account of language pointing to how philosophy itself is metaphorical at its very foundation because the "rhetorical operations that produce supposedly logical proofs cannot be eliminated" (Loy, 1988, p. 250). The parable of the burning house articulated in the Lotus Sutra used to elucidate *upāya* can be read as one of many instances within Mahāyāna Buddhism that places value on rhetorical significance. At the same time, however, Zen would argue that this is the end of the road for a Derridean world,

because Derrida's philosophy does not really find a way out of metaphysics (which Derrida recognizes) since it only launches a "single-deconstruction" that ends up leading to a temporary reversal of a hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> Now this is where Zen exerts its greatest strength: like any good Zen master who knows how to play with the rhetoric of paradoxes (e.g., *kōans!*), Zen presents an avenue of existence that refuses to be trapped in the labyrinth of a language game as such by demonstrating the limits of applying the Derridean critique of language to Zen enlightenment. In fact, what Zen offers is such a radical view of language and experience that it reveals Derrida's own logocentric fixation. Since Derrida's critique applies more to the Abrahamic religions than Zen thought, we might think of Zen as a religion of "demythification," as Nishitani Keiji describes it,<sup>2</sup> that completes the deconstructive gesture by taking the Buddha and nothingness as empty in themselves. This is where Ueda Shizuteru's discussion of Zen is useful in the conversation between Zen and Derrida.

## 2 Ueda, Derrida, and the Problem of Language in Zen Experience

Ueda Shizuteru's account of language and experience demonstrates both a compatibility and tension between Zen enlightenment and Derrida's account of language in the clarification of how subjectivity exists inside and outside of language, particularly, with religious experiences like *kenshō* or *satori*. It is true that, as Derrida argues, there are no experiences outside of texts, outside of language, and here, Ueda (1995) to some extent agrees: "Any reality that we perceive is already a reality that is interpreted through language. Through its own particular horizons of articulation and interpretation, language steers and guides all experiences and this makes them possible in the first place" (p. 1). But while Derrida and Ueda converge on the point that the things of the world appear and are understood only through language, one of the divergences between them lies in the way Zen conceptualizes the relationship between language and experience as a bilateral movement—what Ueda calls the "exiting of language and then exiting into language" (言葉から出て言葉に出る). Bret W. Davis (2019) further clarifies this dynamic succinctly: "Ueda shows how we can understand its [Zen] contradictory stances toward linguistic expression not as an inconsistency that plagues Zen but rather as a dynamic interplay essential to it. Zen's paradoxical ambivalence toward language is not a problem; it's the point" (p. 716).

Note that the divergence here does not point to a rejection of the Derridean worldview, because after all, Derrida does not reduce language to speech or thoughts within consciousness. On the contrary, Derrida's strategy is to re-configure the entire theoretical trajectory on language by articulating a third position, which he calls

<sup>1</sup> Loy (1988) explains this point about the "single deconstruction" quite succinctly here: "For the nondualist, this can be only the illusion of liberation, while remaining trapped in a textual 'bad infinity' that tends to become increasingly ludic. What is needed is not just 'a change of style,' however seductive or frustrating that may be. Rather, the complete deconstruction of such dualities can lead, not merely to their more self-conscious 'reinscription,' but to a mode of experience which is not governed by them. The nondualist agrees that such dualities are ineluctably inscribed in language and thus are fundamental categories of thought; however, this means not that they are inescapable, but that their deconstruction points finally to an experience beyond language—or, more precisely, to a nondual way of experiencing language and thought (pp. 249–250)."

<sup>2</sup> See *Religion and Nothingness*, 1982, pp. 173–174.

“*archi-écriture*,” a position that which is irreducible to speech and writing. One of the aims of this third position is to prevent any view of language that seeks to privilege speech over writing, body over mind, or signified over signifier (and vice versa) by demonstrating that there is a surplus or excess to signification, which suggests that signs are not fully present as it is often believed (see Derrida, 1997, p. 208). The deeper implication of Derrida’s work here is that there are traces within language inscribed into the context of subjectivity and thereby transcend the consciousness of the speakers by existing as a chain of signifiers even in the absence of the addressee. Derrida scholar Leslie Hill (2007) describes the underlying issue here: “Contexts are crucial, but cannot be exhaustively described. The contexts described here, then, are far from exhausting the many possibilities inseparable from Derrida’s work. They are necessarily incomplete; and there will always be many further contexts to be considered” (p. 32). What this all suggests rather are the different questions that are being pursued, which above all, represent a unique relationship between Ueda’s discourse on Zen and Derrida’s account of language: for Derrida, one of the central questions is why and how (linguistic) meaning is fundamentally unstable, whereas for Ueda, the central question in regard to language within the context of Zen always returns to the existential investigation of “Who am I?,” as it points to the non-existence of a reified self that is foundational to Buddhist philosophy as a whole. Both thinkers are concerned with the dynamic movement of language itself, but they do not necessarily have the same phenomenon in mind. The exiting of language is really the exiting of speech or one’s internal dialogue within Ueda’s view, but for Derrida, language includes the very investigation of signs (like Ueda’s investigation) as well as the traces of appearances (or of the disappearance of the signs themselves rather), which interestingly enough, renders thinking a constant act of de-structuring. How to ease some of the tensions between these two thinkers is the central aim of this article.

One must bear in mind now that Ueda philosophizes not just about Zen, but from Zen, just like Nishida and Nishitani before him, and therefore speaks from a unique, if not a privileged position, on the relationship between language and experience as a way to illustrate Zen’s paradoxical structure (Davis, 2019, pp. 713–714). In fact, this very paradoxical structure is what makes Zen experience rather peculiar and therefore an important conversational partner with Derrida. For instance, there is a violence to language for both Ueda and Derrida, but while for Derrida, the caution is against its rhetorical functions within the domain of public discourse (within the implicit hierarchies that are enacted), Ueda’s caution is directed more at its power to alienate, impede, or make difficult or impossible the various experiences of subjectivity. Or, for Ueda, the opposite can happen as well: language can allow humans to approach reality in a way that empowers or emancipates experience from its tightly woven relationship with language as a cognitive event. While both Derrida and Ueda often speak of this as being the “excess” baked within language,<sup>3</sup> the excess Ueda (1995) mentions is what “turns language as a cognitive horizon into a potential world cage” or what becomes the source of “liberation from language toward language” (p. 2). Language both enables and limits experience (Ueda, 2011a, p. 766). Nonetheless, the event, or the interruption of normal, everyday experience

<sup>3</sup> Derrida’s discussion of the excess of language refers to the remainder of signification imbued within contexts that gives rise to new readings of new contexts. The excess is therefore the lack of signification or the remaining unsignified.

by way of Zen experience (*kenshō* or *satori*) is what instantiates the tearing through of our linguistic frameworks and thus a critical site of investigation. Perhaps then, in a radicalization of a Derridean world, Ueda presents Zen experience in toto as a movement beyond the extreme positions that a) everything is in language and b) that language is what blocks the way to true reality (Davis, 2019, p. 767). What this tells us then is that while language is one of the conditions of possibility for experiencing the world, it is also a latticework or mesh that is torn through and resurrected by particular religious experiences. But how is language torn and reconstructed through the events triggered by religious experiences—through Zen experience more specifically? In order to understand this dynamic process, let us turn to Ueda’s discussion of Nishida Kitarō’s notion of “pure experience.”

### 3 Ueda on Nishida’s Concept of Pure Experience

As the third generation Kyoto School philosopher, Ueda would return to the founder’s early writings on religious experiences, in particular Nishida’s concept of pure experience (純粹經驗), as a way to make sense of the bilateral movement between language and experience. Although Nishida’s notion of pure experience can appear rather ambiguous, there are some fundamental points that can be extracted: a) that pure experience refers to the fundamental basis of experience that exists before the division of subject and object (and therefore a primordial or original experience that can never be removed or erased) as well as b) an enlightenment experience which becomes “an animated state with maximum freedom in which there is no gap between the demands of the will and their fulfillment” (NKZ 1, 1965, p. 14; Nishida, 1990, p. 8). But for Ueda, Nishida’s notion of pure experience does something else: it serves to clarify how subjectivity can exist in and beyond language itself—or, in other words, how religious experiences, specifically Zen experience, can be thought of as an extralinguistic phenomenon. Such is possible because, as demonstrated in Ueda’s reading of Nishida, there is a circular movement at the ground of all experience (i.e., pure experience), in which there is a continuous return to the primordially of experience within experience itself. Therefore, as Ueda (2011b) says, such is “not a metaphysics beyond experience, like in most cases of metaphysics, but rather straight in the opposite direction: on the side of experienced experience in the midst of the experiential experience par excellence” (p. 27). Ueda here is not defending the view that all reality is always already non-mediated or wholly linguistically free, but rather seeks to affirm the view of how (pure) experience can serve as the condition of possibility for poetic speech and conceptual thought (Döll, 2019, p. 489). In other words, our underlying experiential unity prior to any subject-object bifurcation represents how Zen experience can be viewed as dynamic irruptive events of linguistic tearing that allow for a linguistic reconstruction (*qua* bilateral movement of exiting of language and exiting into language) of the world.

According to Ueda, this exiting of language and exiting into language is never a smooth or automatic movement or series of events. Rather, such events occur as moments in the stream of primordial experience where language is torn through into silence and then silence is torn through into language. This why Ueda describes the movement of this relationship as the death and resurrection of experience (Ueda, 2011b, p. 31). For Ueda, there is no speech without silence and no silence without speech, particularly within the

movement of *zazen* and *sanzen* in Zen practice; therefore, pure experience comes to represent this particular dynamic interplay between speech and silence (with each characterizing a polar extreme of experience) by virtue of articulating the originary event where experience is both pre-linguistic and proto-linguistic.

Ueda's discussion of silence and language is compatible with Derrida's discourse on the "postponement" or "delay" of signifiers. In the Derridean world, meaning is perpetually deferred because meaning is never present in the word itself but in the other words around it—in the differential contexts in which they exist. That is to say, the "traces" of meaning *qua* the "always already hidden" contradictions of language characterize absence, not presence, and thus exist as empty simulations of presence. As Derrida (1973) writes: "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace; otherwise it would not be a trace but an indestructible and monumental substance" (p. 156). Without undermining the Derridean account of language, Ueda's originary event represents a moment within pure experience where there is an opening up of a new linguistic world, or a modification of an existing world, where experience moves back and forth from predetermined linguistic worlds of meaning towards events of creation. But creation here, for Ueda, is not a capturing of a transcendental signified—this fixed place that is outside of meaning to which all signs point; on the contrary, it is the returning to the world of signs that have been postponed or deferred, and the events of creation that tear through our linguistic frameworks represent one aspect of the Derridean free play that disrupts presence. If the excess can be turned into a source for liberation from language toward language, then Zen experience, in the spirit of the compassionate wisdom of the bodhisattva, can offer a method of critique by which hierarchies are subverted and re-written à la Derrida.

While there is indeed compatibility between Derrida and Ueda here, tension also exists. What is under the philosophical microscope within Derrida's analyses are linguistic signs, giving the appearance that only signs should be the object of investigation. After all, deconstruction is the very reading of linguistic meanings as the dynamic structuration of historical thought. On the whole, such a view presents a challenge for the sort of claims posited by negative theology, mostly because the post-Kantian world has lent itself to the frame that subjectivity is primarily a slave to representations, given that the conscious mind is thought to be limited by the world of constructed appearances. This is one of the reasons why non-dual experiences cannot truly exist within the Derridean world, as non-duality is just another hidden expression of duality. However, if we start from the standpoint of pure experience, as Ueda and Nishida have argued, then it is possible to see how non-dual experiences can exist in a world of duality—at least from the standpoint of the first-person. Let us look at Ueda's discussion on *zazen* and *sanzen* again. According to Ueda, *zazen* and *sanzen* represent these two different worlds that are linked to the same (pure) experience: in the deepest state of the former, as in the case of *samādhi*, there is no separation between subject and object (only suchness), while the latter characterizes the (re)encounters with the (re)established frames of linguistic meaning. Ueda (2004) explains:

Even a brief glance reveals the fundamental difference between *zazen* and *sanzen*. In *zazen*, where there is no opposition, only the individual exists. Or rather, in the

state in which the individual is *mu*, the individual has disappeared in the emptiness of *zazen*. On the other hand, in *sanzen*, one individual faces another at the boundary between one and other. *Zazen* is total silence, a profound continuation in stillness; *sanzen* must see with words, words born out of the silence of *zazen*. (p. 47)

As Ueda maintains here, since Zen experience is a matter of moving in and out of duality and non-duality, one might say then that it is not linguistic signs as such that establish the boundaries or limits of experience, but rather pure experience itself that functions as the limits of the horizon of linguistic meaning of the singular subject. If language can be truly seen in this way, then language is bound to experience just as much as experience is bound to language.

Ueda's *Urwort* ("originary word" or *kongengo* 根源語) is also an important concept to understand here. For Ueda, there are moments when language spontaneously arises in our everyday lives—particularly in our "oh," "wow," or "ah" interjections—that can be represented as a simultaneous double event: that is, as soon as it is uttered, the "oh!" interjection constitutes a speechless gesture as well as the primordial sound of the unspeakable. But not only is the "oh!" a primordial word or sound rooted in silence, it is also a moment where the person expressing the "oh" becomes robbed of the power to articulate proper speech. In the case of the latter, the lapsing into silence in the moment of speechlessness represents the event of a person becoming the "oh!," where silence just expresses itself (Ueda, 2011b, pp. 30–31). But the "oh!" itself is also what triggers the movement out of language and then back into language. Ueda (2011b) explains:

That 'oh' as an eventful 'pure experience' is also a circular movement out of language via absolute silence back into language. The lifting movement to language is as such the originary word, the non-verbal pre-word to language, thereby, opening the way to language. And now it arrives at language—the originary word becomes articulated through language in words. (p. 32)

As Ueda suggests here, while language is always present and relevant to experience itself, it cannot serve as a replacement for experience because it is that which arises in and through experience. In other words, language must be distinguished from experience and yet it is that which interrelates with experience in its dynamic relationship with it.

In a Derridean reading of the *Urwort*, the surplus within language is that which allows for the *Urwort* to exist whereas the *Urwort* itself is the simulacrum of the traces of the unsayable presence. While the unspeakable, or that which cannot be articulated, is the "oh!" interjection or the primordial word that causes us to lapse into silence, it is also what demonstrates the existence of the surplus of language in speech itself. This is because the unspeakable represents the gateway into verbalization, into the structural play of signification. This all gives support to what Michael Polanyi (1966) once said: "we can know more than we can tell" (p. 4).<sup>4</sup> To know (intuitively) precedes verbalization, and our unsayable interjections demonstrate this, especially in Zen experience, because knowing is never a capturing of a semantic truth claim or an intellectual

<sup>4</sup> Drawing on insights from Gestalt psychology, Michael Polanyi argues that knowing is more fundamental than language acquisition. All knowledge, for Polanyi, is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge.

enunciation of some phenomena, but rather to know events as they are (intuitively). But if we think about how the *Urwort* is born, there is something else at work—emotionality or affectivity—driving the utterance from the unspoken state because such affective states of consciousness are often the engine for further verbalization or explanation. How we can ease the tension between the Derridean world and Zen experience then is by showing how the duality of language and the non-duality of Zen experience represents two different “worlds” within the same stream of experience bound to the discursive structures of history. Linguistic structures are the locus of investigation, not experience, in the Derridean world, which is why Derrida continuously emphasizes the problem of exclusion and marginalization generated by linguistic production. But then experience is the locus of investigation within the Zen world, which is why non-dual experience can co-exist within the duality of the linguistic horizon. If we take pure experience as the limits of linguistic play instead of starting and ending with the shoveling of all experience through the Derridean machine of linguistic deconstructionism, then we can ease some of the logical tensions between the non-duality of Zen experience and the duality of the Derridean worldview.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4 Being-in the Two-Fold World: The Radicalization of Heidegger

The tension between Derrida and Ueda is also about a tension between Heidegger and Derrida, and Heidegger and Ueda. For the later Heidegger, language has its own self-generating or self-authorizing power of being that can bring subjectivity into a state of self-consciousness. There is a quasi-divine quality to language, where subjectivity is possessed by it such that it speaks beyond the intention of subjectivity. Language is intimately related to thinking and thinking is intimately related to knowing; and if “language is the house of being,” to cite Heidegger’s cryptic remark, then it can be thought that “experience is not of our own making” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 57).<sup>6</sup> How Derrida deals with Heidegger’s account of language is by radicalizing the space of signification within the movement of time: that is, by demonstrating the metaphoricity existing in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology in order to reveal the insurmountable limit for thinking and speaking about the authenticity of Being (see Derrida, 2016, pp. 59–65).<sup>7</sup> Since metaphor is irreducible, metaphysics cannot be overcome by Being because the metaphoricity of philosophy refuses to reveal, once and for all, the (non-metaphorical) truth of Being. In and through the space expressed in historical time, metaphors will only supplement their meanings through other metaphors in thought, speech, and writing.

Ueda, on the other hand, reads Heidegger in the opposite direction: by radicalizing the place of experience of “being-in” the world away from re-affirming any separation between subject and object. If human existence is characterized by “being-in” this world, then a reality beyond the Heideggerian world of Being delegates the first chore

<sup>5</sup> Derrida has been accused of expanding, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham (2002) says, “the concept of the sign to cover the field of language, and then expands the concept of language to cover almost everything else” (p. 36).

<sup>6</sup> When Heidegger refers to language as a house of being, the exact quote is as follows: “Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells” (Heidegger, 1978, p. 217).

<sup>7</sup> This stands in contrast to Heidegger’s view who writes that metaphysics is in fact in decline and is now approaching its end and therefore would need to be rethought (as the unconcealment of Being).



to be a full collapsing of any subject and world (that is mediated by language) distinction. While Ueda asserts that Heidegger's "being-in" the world is indeed a metaphor to describe the "horizon" (地平) of experience (a view that is also palatable to Derrida's take on language and being), such a view, however, really only refers to the horizon of the geographical world, and not to the "other side of the horizon" (地平の彼方) (see Ueda, 2019, p. 93). According to Ueda, we live in a two-fold world (二重世界内存在), a place that is both infinite and open as well as finite and closed at the same time (Ueda, 1992a, pp. 45–47). But insofar as language is treated as the only vehicle for transformation, the subject-world duality that renders the world finite and closed will remain invisible and therefore inevitably return Being to its home of metaphysical presence. While Ueda admits that Heidegger comes close to Nishida's work on pure experience in the attempt to "overcome metaphysics," it is only the latter who manages to avoid the "repetition of the same" generated by metaphysical speculation because of his commitment to sketching the pre-reflective source of philosophical thought. Nevertheless, Ueda holds that it is Nishida's concept of *basho* (場所), and all of its multi-layered worlds, that moves the Heideggerian world of Being in and out of the non-metaphysical—the infinite openness that is beyond the horizon of this world. This is because what Heidegger describes as the "world" is re-interpreted as the Nishidian place (*basho*) in which we discover ourselves in relation to others—that is, "being-in" the world is that of being implaced (*Da-sein in der Welt = oitearu* 於いてある)—and that such an implacement is also permeated and surrounded by the invisible world of the infinite nothing. Therefore, subjectivity is ineluctably implaced in two worlds, or rather, implaced in two horizons of experience: a) the world of contextual meanings structuring the horizon of understanding, that which render things to appear concrete, and b) the world beyond the world of contextual meanings itself that is implaced in the infinite openness or open expanse, a world similar to what Nishida calls absolute nothingness (*zettai-mu* 絶対無) or what Ueda calls non-place (*hibasho* 非場所) (for more on non-place, see Ueda, 1992a, pp. 106–107).<sup>8</sup> Ueda (1989) captures this schema in the following words:

In any case, when the "world" of human existence is talked about, the world is structurally two-fold, and being-in-the-two-fold world is the fundamental structure of human existence and so this structure ends up becoming the foundation of religious understanding. [...] (Even if it is called the two-fold world, the various worlds cannot be erased, and even if there are multiple various worlds, or even if they can be conceived, in the end, they cannot be qualitatively reduced, and the world implaced in the two-foldness that which cannot be flattened is originally our world of human existence). (p. 2)

But how do we make the world of infinite openness, the world of the open expanse, a world that can be experienced by subjectivity?

<sup>8</sup> There is a lot of debate around how to translate Nishida's *zettai-mu* or *zettai-mu no basho* (絶対無の場所). Normally, it is better to translate *zettai-mu no basho* as "the place of absolutely nothing" to prevent turning *mu* into a noun, but this article is opting for the "absolute nothingness" translation in order to avoid confusing Ueda's non-place with Nishida's absolute nothingness of non-thinking.

Ueda claims that the visible horizon of the everyday world often presents our life experiences as enclosed, concrete, and tangible. We fix ourselves within this lived space by latching onto everyday things without fully realizing the infinite open world beyond this horizon of experience. In fact, the “Angst” of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* can make this world or horizon of experience seem more real, or more felt, and the infinite openness all the more obscure because anxiety further conceals the primordially of the infinite nothing beyond the horizon of the everyday. Only when anxiety gives way to releasement, when the self is willing to die an “existential death,” is where we see the possibility to move beyond the horizon of everyday experience and into the “other side of the horizon” (Döll, 2011, p. 132).

While the everyday world is characterized by the discursive structures of language, forcing us to confront the Derridean world of signs, our selfless self on the other hand already lives in the *Da* of nothing (*mu* 無).<sup>9</sup> The question is then “how” to shade the Heideggerian world of Being in favor of making the world of Zen more visible. What ultimately brings visibility to the invisibility of the infinite openness, according to Ueda, are not the mere actions of the self, but rather the performance of negativity. For Ueda, this negativity is absolute silence, which functions as a negation between language and the two-fold world. But in order to achieve a breakthrough into the infinitely open world, subjectivity must cultivate silence by sinking the self into the space of infinite stillness and infinite openness (Ueda, 1995, p. 11).<sup>10</sup> Or, rather, the entrance into this absolute realm of infinite stillness and infinite openness depends on the (absolute) negation of both subject and object—meaning, even clinging to the nothing itself is a hindrance to one’s arrival. The negation of negation (*qua* nothing) itself, not from the standpoint of reason, but in the form of silence, is the catalyst for rupturing both the duality and unity of experience into an immediate and direct affirmation of the open expanse where “the holy and the secular have disappeared without a trace” (Ueda, 1995, p. 13). Negation, here, is a movement of two directions: a) a negation of negation that opens up into the endlessly open nothing and b) a negation of negation that leads to affirmation without any trace of mediation (Döll, 2019, p. 495). We have now reached the point where Ueda speaks of self-understanding (*jiko rikai* 自己理解) as an articulation of non-dual experience, where the self is a not a self within religious cultivation.

## 5 Language within the Self that Is Not a Self

Ueda identifies the Ten Ox-herding Pictures to be a useful guide for illustrating the unfolding of self-examination or self-understanding within Zen Buddhism (Ueda, 1992b, pp. 33–34). But the last three drawings are particularly significant for depicting how the “phenomenology of the self” ends with a self-less self (*selbst-lose Selbst*) that reflects the whole of all reality. The first drawing is an empty circle, with nothing in it, which is an attempt to depict an imagelessness world that is beyond images—or what

<sup>9</sup> *Da* here is the German word for “there.” This comes from Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein*, which is often translated as “Being-there.”

<sup>10</sup> Ueda here makes a distinction between three different forms of silence: a) silence as non-speaking, b) pensive silence that pushes us deeper into silence, and c) the silence of infinite stillness and openness that is undisturbed by the uttering of words (1995, p. 11).

Zen commonly calls the infinite nothing. According to Ueda, the infinite nothing here functions as an infinite negation that denies all dualities and unities, where the “Great Death” results in a selflessness that is formless and imageless because the infinite nothing resists being turned into a negative substance (Ueda, 2011b, pp. 199–200). The second picture has a concrete form, which is nothing more than a blossoming tree by a river accompanied by the text: “the flowers bloom as they bloom.” What is depicted here is not the standpoint from an external observer looking at an objective landscape, but rather the dynamic reality of the self-less self from the standpoint of the first person. While the first drawing characterizes the event of “breaking through” into the infinite nothing, the “resurrection” of the self-less self appears as the blossoming tree by the river in the second picture. In other words, the flowers are just blooming “as they are,” “without why,” and the self, in all of its selflessness, blooms along with the flowers themselves, along with the river itself. What is affirmed here is the language of nature (of reality) itself, where flowers are flowers, river is river (water is water), and mountains are mountains, without the need for a logos (Ueda, 2011b, pp. 16–18, 200). Then there is the third drawing: an encounter between an old man and a youth amidst the everyday world. Symbolized here, according to Ueda, is the development of the selflessness of the old man because the old man returns to others in the world as a bodhisattva who embodies a state of absolute silence and an attitude of compassion seeking to inspire others to pursue the same quest. But there is a “betweenness” that is represented here as well, an I and Thou relationship illustrated by the old man and the youth, which aims to capture the selflessness embodied in nature by depicting the maneuvering space itself that centers the question of “Who am I?” in the exchanges between the old man and the youth (Ueda, 2011b, pp. 18–22, 201–203).

What Ueda is trying to advance with all of this is the view that the self-less self is both a movement and a non-movement as well as a freedom from itself and for itself. But language is implicated here as well. In the unfolding of these pictures is not only the attempt to represent the process of discovering the self-less self but how (absolute) silence, or negation rather, destabilizes our linguistic attachments that metaphorize essentialism and nihilism. Of course, discovering this self-less self is not a matter of just remaining silent, because such also requires the negation of language via language (and silence) in order to subvert the notion that the self exists and thinks within a closed system of signs. To put it another way: within Zen, according to Ueda, the concept of nothing exists in opposition to (and therefore supports) the category of Being, and so Being and nothing constitute an inseparable duality. But it is only through the negation of both, via language (*qua* speech) and silence, where the language of reality is truly revealed. The point here is that Zen does not seek to exclude thought and language but rather to elucidate those events prior to thinking and the deployment of speech. The concern for Zen is mostly to bring to light where thinking first begins and is established as well as how signifiers become reified in a way that ends up in self-enclosure and non-freedom.

Let us return to the drawings again. Ueda argues that in the first drawing, the human becomes the nothing, but in the second drawing, the human becomes a specific form. That is, the human speaker is actually there, but existing in the speech itself in the articulation of the “flowers bloom as they bloom,” with no trace of the speaker itself in reality. In other words, the speaker is just a speaking *Da* and therefore exists as the actual speaking of “the flowers bloom as they bloom” itself. But in the third drawing,

Ueda claims that there is now a full depiction of a freedom from language for language, where the dialogue between I and Thou appears in the double self between the old man and the youth. The entire context of Zen is found here: the nothing, the nature of reality, and the I-Thou relationship expressing the self-less self that is both movement and non-movement, and how the language of nature that is spoken is really the language of freedom. In this regard, we can see how Zen subjectivity moves in and out of metaphysics, in and out of the Derridean world, where it can find freedom from linguistic signs towards freedom in linguistic signs, particularly in the aspiration to liberate all signifiers that metaphorize fixed ontologies of the world.

To be sure, such drawings would prompt Derrida to claim that there is nothing outside the text (*“Il n’y a pas de hors—texte”*), that there is nothing outside language. Even if there are no traces within the experience itself (like in the second picture), there are traces of meaning formed within the context of one’s encounter with an object, because language is precisely the place where exiting language can even be a possibility. In this sense, Derrida would argue that exiting speech is not the same thing as exiting language. But at the same time, Ueda would respond that Derrida has only really clarified the limits and openness (and thus the possibilities) of the first horizon of experience—the linguistic horizon of the everyday world as it moves through history—and thereby fails to clarify how both horizons of experience can exist simultaneously, and how such horizons limits and opens experience. But if Derrida were to have the last word here, we would view the world of signs as having a much larger role than the world of silence in the constitution of experience, which inevitably forces subjectivity to (re)create social history within the world of signs in its search for meaning while eventually facing the return of the repressed. The Derridean world of signs is a world of dangerous beliefs and ideologies that carve the everyday terrain into diametrical opposites. How does subjectivity and Zen experience work through the world of dualities expressed by language and find absolute freedom for themselves and others in their world of non-duality?

## 6 The Tension between Meister Eckhart and the Views of Derrida and Ueda

The difference between Derrida’s and Ueda’s reading of Meister Eckhart’s apophatic theology reveals a secret insight into this tension. According to Derrida himself, deconstruction can be thought of as analogous to negative theology while remaining an infinite distance from it, therefore pointing to how negative theology as a whole denies what is secretly true. While Derrida does show affection towards negative theology, even stating that it is written in a way “that does not cease testing the very limits of language” (quote taken from Almond, 2000, p. 330), any denial of onto-theology for Derrida, however, is nothing other than an affirmation of onto-theology in the end. This is because even the gesture itself to know God by what it is not renders discourse into a statement about God, leaving the metaphysics of presence wholly intact. Perhaps then, from a Derridean standpoint, Nishida’s absolute nothingness or Ueda’s concept of the open expanse could be read as another substitute for a transcendental signified. But is there another way to save the world of the unsigned, the world of religious experience, from reducing it to Derrida’s reading of Eckhart?

It is important to bear in mind that Ueda, the Zen tradition, and Derrida do agree on one thing: that if  $A \neq A$ , therefore it is A, then all discursive signs defer just as much as they refer. But this is only one half of the Hegelian dialectic: what Ueda tells us is that this semantic proposition of  $A \neq A$ , therefore it is A is also a metaphor pointing to the world of the imagelessness, of the unsigned—in other words, the infinite nothing. This is because Ueda, who is more Nishidian than Hegelian (as opposed to Derrida who is more Hegelian than Nishidian), advances a dialectic that shows how the logic of *basho*, which refuses any privileging of positivity over negativity (and vice versa), or presence over absence (and vice versa), or silence over language (and vice versa), illuminates how the performative function of (absolute) negation within subjectivity implaced in the infinite nothing reveals the hollowness of the world itself. As Ueda (2011a) writes: “Language reveals things. [...] While revealing beings and while reflecting being as a whole, words are “hallow words” that reflectively expose the hallow expanse or ‘absolute nothingness’ in which being as a whole is located” (p. 778). But it is the “without why” of the language of nature, as depicted in the second Ox-herding picture, that is arguably one of the more revealing illustrations of these tensions because it demonstrates how the Abrahamic traditions cannot exist without recurring to some kind of logos. But we need to ask ourselves now: how is Nishida’s dialectic more useful than the Hegelian dialectic for understanding the problem of language and the prospect of absolute freedom in Ueda’s philosophical worldview?

As opposed to Hegel’s dialectic, which is often thought of as a movement of logical positions grounded in a substance ontology, Nishida’s dialectic seeks to elucidate a view of the world that denies any substantiality of existence altogether. While both make good use of the logical relations of affirmation and negation in the elucidation of how reality and lived experience are constituted, it is more Nishida’s dialectics rather than Hegel’s dialectic that supports the logical possibility of an empty, non-identarian experience (Schultz, 2012, pp. 332–333). In fact, Nishida’s concept of *basho* is reformulated by Ueda in order to further emphasize this logical possibility: that what Ueda calls “double openness” (*Doppelerschlossenheit*) in his discussion of the two-fold world is both a) the infinite openness that encompasses and subsumes everything, that which exists within itself while transcending itself and therefore open without limits, and b) the hollow expanse (虚空) or the unlimited openness (限りない開) that situates us in the world space of concrete meaning that is finite and limited, without this limit ever becoming destroyed (Ueda, 2004, pp. 178–179). Such a double openness, as Ueda would have it, is the condition of possibility for being-in-the-world, but the hollow expanse in particular functions to structurally limit the cognitive and linguistic horizon of understanding of each and every particular while providing an openness to their experience.<sup>11</sup> If the world of signs is limited to some extent by this particular side of the double openness, then subjectivity can only really evolve, grow, and find freedom for oneself and others through the breakthrough of dualities, through the breakthrough of language toward language within the infinite openness.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, if the irruptive

<sup>11</sup> Ueda claims that the limitlessness of the infinite openness sets limits to the world we inhabit and yet penetrates it at its limits. That is to say, the world, as the horizon of all horizons, is only limited in the sense that it implies a boundedness and a beyond, but at the same time, that which surrounds the world must be thought of as unlimited.

<sup>12</sup> The sort of growth advocated by Derrida falls along the lines of Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit, which according to Zen, behaves more in line with rational self-reflection than a self-negation at the heart of all being.

events occurring in pure experience is what triggers the exiting of linguistic speech and exiting into linguistic speech, then Derrida's reading of negative theology begins to look more like linguistic reductionism (i.e., reducing all of experience to linguistic signs).

Perhaps this is not a fair game here. After all, Derrida's method of critique only truly applies to Eckhart's religious works (and not even all of them), and not necessarily Zen Buddhism (even though the implications affect Buddhist thought). Furthermore, we must also take into consideration that Derrida's deconstruction is not a procedural method, like something one does to a text, but represents continuous acts, rather, that which are already at work in the work itself, which many scholars argue is akin to religious awareness. On the other hand, we need to consider that Ueda also has his own critique of Eckhart as well, based mostly around not going far enough in pushing self-negation to the point of moving through and out of mysticism, to what Ueda calls "non-mysticism" (Davis, 2008, p. 222). Ueda (2018) further explains:

In Zen Buddhism, it says: 'when you encounter the Buddha, kill him' and 'go past where the Buddha is quickly' and 'those scriptures are nothing but dirty scrap paper.' In spite of all similarities, it is precisely this fact that profoundly distinguishes the mysticism of Meister Eckhart from Zen Buddhism. Both the negative theological apprehension of transcendence and the return toward reality as a real implementation of the breakthrough to true transcendence are carried out much more radically and consistently in Zen Buddhism than in Meister Eckhart. (p. 183)

In defense of Derrida's point regarding the metaphoricity of Being, Ueda does concede that "the world of language is layered upon this world of limitless openness" (Ueda, 2011a, p. 769), which reveals how "this whole [of the world] is reflected in the mutual referentiality of its signs" (Ueda, 2011a, p. 777). But then contra Derrida, Ueda argues that language "also reflects this limitless openness that transcends and envelops the world" (Ueda, 2011a, p. 777), thereby demonstrating not only how "language [alone] cannot reveal the hollow-expanse itself" but also how "it can reflect it by way of describing a kind of virtual world within the hollow-expanse that reflects it" (Ueda, 2011a, p. 778). What Ueda's view of the radical nature of Zen experience therefore demonstrates are the limits of Derrida, Hegel, and other leading luminaries of Western thought in capturing the full breadth, depth, and range of human experience and the sort of the implications on language and freedom that can be derived thereof, simply because Derrida's and Hegel's dialectics cannot follow the trail of negation within subjective experience all the way to the end that leads to a world beyond metaphysics. It is as what Steve G. Lofts (2021) remarks about Derrida's limit to metaphysics:

...he [Derrida] nevertheless remains entangled in that language [of metaphysics] and so is not able to fully articulate the aporetic logic of the event of thinking-language-time-being. Derrida's attempt to think thinking cannot bring him to the standpoint of non-thinking and the standpoint of absolute nothingness, as articulated by Dōgen and given philosophical expression by Nishida, that grounds the singularity of the event and opens the possibility of a desubstantialised, non-

identitarian framework of singularity that thinks, speaks, and exists from the place of nothingness. (p. 93)

Indeed, Derrida does follow his own trail of negation, but such only leads to other mazes of linguistic signs, whereas Ueda finds more openings to experience and worlds of being that point to another world of creative freedom revealed through self-negation. But the final question we now need to ask is: how can the Derridean world of endless chains of signification and Ueda's two-fold world be properly sutured together to bring forth a world of social liberation?

## **7 Conclusion: Breaking through the Derridean World through the Ethical Vow of Zen**

If we return to the methodological differences between Ueda and Derrida, we will find that Derrida is mostly interested in deconstructing the entire trajectory of linguistic structures as they have been transmitted from intellectual lineage to intellectual lineage, whereas Ueda is mostly interested in deconstructing the entire subject-object distinction as a particular epistemological position in Western intellectual history. Given this methodological gap, any tension between them may be eased if we examine them side-by-side more closely. In light of this, we will discuss one remaining tension as a concluding point: that is, the tension of ethical deliberation. Derrida's guiding insight within his critique of Western philosophy shows how every linguistic structure, whether it is in the field of economics, religion, or literature and so forth, organizes and constitutes our experiences, and how these linguistic structures inevitably leave something out by virtue of repeated acts of exclusion, while Ueda's guiding insight (or at least one of them) shows how Zen experience points to a (two-fold) world where subjectivity finds freedom through its dynamic movement of exiting in and out of linguistic signs by way of including what is normally thought to be excluded. The question then becomes not just one of social repression, but how to (ethically) break through the repression to bring forth a more just world.

According to Derrida, all philosophical thought embodies exclusive structures that are repressive, which have profound consequences for the world when the repressed returns sometime in the future. And yet Derrida believes that privileging certain categories over others within a binary set is structurally unavoidable. Derrida, in the attempt to formulate an ethical stance, seeks to manage this problem of violence cathected by exclusion not through a prescribed order that overcomes it, but through calling attention to how violence is impossible to escape within our everyday actions. Such a view would find agreement with Nishida's and Ueda's schemata as well, except that both Kyoto School thinkers go one step further by asserting that the good can never be realized without entering into the terrain of evil as an absolute contradiction—that the true absolute must contain its own self-negation to the point of contradiction, where the good is realized through its confrontation with evil itself. But Ueda has something else in mind that addresses the sort of violence fostered by the dichotomies we create and confront in the world as well—namely, to descend into the place of nothing enveloping the two-fold world that makes it possible to think through the violence generated by our own linguistic parochialism. But how?

Bret W. Davis tells us that Zen ethics is best described as a kind of “virtue ethics” where the focus is on developing moral character through the habituation of practical wisdom (Davis, 2008, p. 240). Towards this end, Zen ethics emphasize cultivating compassion in order to help alleviate the suffering of all beings. What this suggests is that the path of Zen is not one of moral reasoning nor one that follows certain moral precepts but rather realizing the necessary skillful means that is willing to break from good and evil in the pursuit of making the world a more just place. Ethical judgment within Zen Buddhism can therefore be thought of more as an art that engages in practicing and developing wise and compassionate decision-making. Ueda’s view of language is implicated here. That is, by exiting out of and returning to linguistic speech itself, we transform not only ourselves, but the language we use to express our care and concern for the world. Our style of being, i.e., our mode of sensation and perception, is thereby transformed in this process, which has an impact on the way we play with structural binaries. But what this suggests for the problem of violence in the everyday world is that we can ease the problem of exclusion and marginalization brought on by our linguistic structures not just by recognizing their impossibility but through transcending the distinction between good and evil by placing compassion at the forefront of all ethical deliberation. Therefore, Ueda’s view of language and freedom eases some of the violence of the Derridean world by illuminating how absolute negation can disrupt our tendency to attach fixed signs onto the world. To address the violence generated by the exclusive structures inscribed in language must come from the dynamic process of exiting linguistic speech and entering into the abyss of radical silence itself only to return to the arena of linguistic play in order to disrupt the abuses of power. But the power of transformation within Ueda’s world emerges not only from one’s descension into the infinite nothing, where signification is pushed and expanded beyond rational limits, it also emerges with the return to the everyday discursive conventions of the Derridean world itself, with the commitment to open the (two-fold) world up for the possibility of experiencing and realizing new discursive conventions, conventions that are more in tune with the compassionate pulse of the universe.

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