

## Derrida and Žižek: On the intersections of *Différance* and Parallax, From *Eating Well* to the *Necessity of Idiocy*

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### Abstract:<sup>1</sup>

One of the most interesting ways of addressing the question of the subject in the wake of postmodernism is to approach it from the encounter of Žižek's thought with that of Derrida. In the aftermath of Žižek's criticism of Derrida's deconstruction, one is faced with the dilemma about the feasibility of the Derridean ethical paradigm in the coming of the "impossible," the "other," or the god who-is-"to-come." If the human subject can only survive by "eating" other human beings in cannibalism, is there still hope in any human ethical enterprise? Using the trope of cannibalism, this paper attempts to assess the whole deconstructive project as an establishment of a fundamental structure of human survival. All human beings must overcome the evils of egoism—as the fundamental problem of the subject—if humanity is to survive. Curiously though, for Žižek, this survival hinges on the figure of the idiot.

**Key words:** Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, deconstruction, cannibalism, human survival

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered as a plenary lecture during the Derrida Festival 2013: Deconstruction from the Margins last July 25-6, 2013 at the Ateneo de Naga University, Naga City, Philippines.

## Introduction

Here, I want to sketch my appraisal of the anthology against the background of one of my favourite Derrida interviews—one conducted by Jean-Luc Nancy which formed part of a previous anthology of essays dedicated to the elaboration of the question of the subject in the wake of postmodernism. The anthology could not have given the question a more fitting title “Who Comes After the Subject?”<sup>2</sup> As the question is individually treated in the anthology, it becomes all the more indicative of a problem to come, a dispositive treatment of the fate of philosophy that has until recently depended on the assumption that the subject stands on solid ground.

I am referring here to Derrida’s interview entitled “Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject.”

## Eating Well

In general we may refer to the anthology as a curious problematization not only of eating well, as Derrida would associate deconstruction with consumption, but more crucially of how to eat Derrida. But it may turn out to be not just a problem of digesting Derrida, but also of refusing Derrida the right to eternal peace. In this sense, to consume Derrida is to keep him alive and digestible, to keep Derrida in a state of the undead.

It was Derrida who started this problem of cannibalism, by the way. In an interview in the early 90s, Derrida says:

Everything that happens on the edge of the orifices (of orality but also of the ear, the eye—all the senses in general) the metonymy of eating well would always be the rule. The question is no longer one of asking if it is “good” to eat the other or if the other is “good” to eat, nor of knowing which other. One eats him regardless and lets oneself be eaten by him. . . The moral question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that, the living or the nonliving, man or animal, but

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<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “Eating Well, Or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview,” in *Who Comes After The Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 96-119.

since one must eat in any case and since it is and tastes good to eat, and since there's no other definition of the good how for goodness sake should one eat well?<sup>3</sup>

For his part, Žižek has made it quite his habit to use the metaphor of the undead, the zombie, as a fodder to his Hegelo-Lacanian brand of philosophy, or his concept of minimal difference<sup>4</sup> (something he admits shares with Derrida's *différance*). In one of his jokes, Žižek, as if in response to Derrida's question of how one should eat well, tells of an incident in Papua New Guinea. In response to a group of explorers' question on the status of cannibalism in the area, perhaps, unsure about their safety, the native replies with reassuring words: "No, there aren't anymore cannibals in our region. We ate the last one yesterday."<sup>5</sup>

So, it would seem the problem of eating well is settled here. The problem of cannibalism must be resolved through the active re-enactment of what constitutes the foundation of cannibalism. Expressed in Derridean terms, the question of how one should eat well is answered through the primordial scene of *necessity*—that, as Derrida puts it, "one must eat in any case." The resolution is a stunning revelation of the precarity of human existence in which cannibalism is the last resort. Expressed in Žižekian terms, the problem of crime must be resolved by re-enacting the first crime, the crime attributed to a *necessity* and therefore a crime that is above any moral judgment. The scene of necessity must nonetheless be protected from the human gaze. It is pornographic, vulgar and obscene.

In other words, the memory of first necessity has to be expunged, thrown into the unconscious. But a trace of that necessity, despite the prohibition, has to be made accessible to consciousness. The point is: it is only by means of a doubly reflected relation to necessity, something of a negative relation, that one can learn to eat well, or what necessity demands, namely, that 'one should not entirely eat on one's own', as Derrida puts it in the same interview, which also means avoiding a societal collapse. But it is more than that.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 114-15.

<sup>4</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, "A Plea for the Return to *Différance* (with a Minor Pro Domo Sua)," in *Adieu Derrida*, 109-134.

<sup>5</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or Why is the Christian legacy is worth fighting for?* (New York and London, 2000), 63.

Recall here that Derrida knows that there being no other definition for the good the question of how one could eat well persists, assuming that the good remains in theory undefinable. In Žižek, nonetheless, it is only undefinable after the fact, that is to say, after the first crime that institutes the good. Let us hear from Žižek, this time detailing how the crime functions as the background of the good: “The crime . . . founds the rule of the Law itself, the violent gesture that brings about a regime which retroactively makes this gesture itself illegal/criminal.”<sup>6</sup> Žižek identifies Moses as the model of this crime when he introduced a break with paganism through a violent repression of polytheistic worship—this, Žižek learns from Freud.

Monotheism is introduced in order to ban all attempts to diversify needs in favor of the Law of diversification of needs. Not from the multiple or polytheism that one can multiply or answer to diverse needs, each god responds to a particular set of needs, but from the One of the Law out of which the Many or diverse needs can be satisfied. But Derrida is more to the point when he puts the figure of the *chef* or the professional cook which corresponds to the concept of the subject at the center of the problem of consumption. Or, what is the same thing, the *chef* as the universal figure that Moses, or Christ, could only accidentally assume in history. Derrida first elaborates the figure of the *chef* in its relation to sacrifice and then to a certain practice of cannibalism:

The virile strength of the adult male, the father, the husband, or brother . . . belongs to the schema that dominates the concept of subject. The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh. . .<sup>7</sup>

The reference to the figure of Christ in relation to the last sentence is unmistakable. The sacrifice culminates in the Cross, while the eating of the flesh is celebrated retroactively in the words of Christ, referring to the metaphor of the bread in the Last Supper: “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22: 19). (Let us not forget that Christ also ate in the Last Supper, in fact, ate himself—he was the bread, his own body, eaten on the table). It is written that Christ would

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, “Eating Well,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, 114.

suffer in order to redeem the sins of mankind, the sins of the father, the husband and brother.<sup>8</sup> These sins are also of Moses who failed to stem the tide of polytheism, the diversification of gods that correspond to diverse needs which also diversify the sins of not eating well, of cannibalism, so to speak. A few lines thereafter Derrida continues:

[In] our countries, who would stand any chance of becoming a *chef d'Etat* (a head of State) . . . by publicly, and therefore exemplarily, declaring him—or herself to be a vegetarian. The *chef* must be an eater of flesh (with a view, moreover, of being “symbolically” eaten himself. . .).<sup>9</sup>

If anything, this amounts to the good news, at least for Žižek. The figure of Christ as the last meal, the last victim to be slaughtered and eaten . . . [The] sacrifice to end all sacrifices.<sup>10</sup> As for Derrida, the finality of eating is in “eating well and doing well to eat.”<sup>11</sup>

The good news is, “the Good can also be eaten.”<sup>12</sup>

### The Cannibal That Therefore I Am

So far, we have made an alliance out of a shared principle of eating that both Derrida and Žižek defended on separate occasions. But this is a tricky correlation.

At the height of their professional careers, Derrida and Lacan (Žižek’s major influence) were almost always in opposite terms. When we speak of an alliance apropos the relationship between Derrida and Žižek in light of the principle of eating that we mentioned, we are in many ways taking a risk of uniting two opposite strands of continental philosophy, but a risk that, notwithstanding the fact that any risk is fraught with danger, is still worthy to pursue. By now, it is apparent that we are taking St. Augustine’s words at their seemingly best value offering regarding the

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<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, to contract sin is better than not sinning at all, referring to the mother, the wife or sister—all excluded from the ambit of sin, therefore technically irredeemable.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, “Eating Well,” 115.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

saving power of danger of which Hölderlin made a beautiful poem, which in turn made Heidegger famous, well, for quoting the poet.<sup>13</sup>

For the time being and by any means at our disposal, let us rather maximize this alliance, between Derrida and Žižek or between deconstruction and psychoanalysis, better put, between *différance* and parallax.

Regarding the crime we just mentioned, it may suffice to say here that the crime is the minimal difference that we as human beings need to sustain concerning the necessity of eating well and doing well to eat.<sup>14</sup> As for Derrida, the crime is the *différance*, in theory the becoming-other of maximum difference into the minimum but impossible requirement for any kind of difference, namely, its *difference from difference*,<sup>15</sup> or, which is the same thing, that difference is arbitrary, irreducibly subjective. Niall Lucy, in *A Derrida Dictionary*, annotating from Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, captures what we intend to say along these lines:

*Différance* marks the opening of a system of differences in which everything acquires meaning and value according to what 'we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world' (Derrida, OG, 70-1)—that the outside is not the inside [*sic*].<sup>16</sup>

In the above light, it is *différance* that keeps common sense stable. Yet it is only stable as far as there is *différance* that marks the arbitrary, nay, ungrounded ground or origin of common sense. What therefore establishes the normality of our ordinary knowledge of reality or things is an abnormal procedure, a scandalous anomaly that secures the stability of the relationship between knowledge and reality. At this point, it may suffice to say that *différance* is a trace of an anomaly that paradoxically guarantees the stability of our everyday relationship to reality.

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<sup>13</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 76.

<sup>14</sup> See Žižek's *The Parallax View*.

<sup>15</sup> See Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Meanwhile, reminiscent of Kierkegaard's pre-deconstructive principle which states that 'subjectivity is truth; subjectivity is actuality', or what Climacus, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, defines as a "doubly reflected subjective thinking,"<sup>17</sup> *différance* is what to Žižek the concept of minimal difference, or the *parallax*, which involves—

A reflexive twist by means of which I myself is involved in the picture constituted by me—it is this reflexive short circuit, this necessary redoubling of myself as standing both inside and outside my picture, that bears witness to my 'material existence.' Materialism means that the reality I see is never "whole"—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.<sup>18</sup>

So as to zero in on the points of similarity between Derrida's and Žižek's description of their individual projects, we are quoting directly from Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (notice the shared value of the word 'inhabiting' in the following passages and compare it with Žižek's concept of 'inclusion'):<sup>19</sup>

The movements of deconstruction do not shake up structures from the outside. They are neither possible and effective, nor can they set their aim [*ajuster leur coup*], except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of

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<sup>17</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 67.

<sup>18</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Preface: Reading De La Grammatologie," in *Reading Derrida's Of Grammatology*, ed. Sean Gaston and Ian Maclachlan (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), xxxii. Spivak slightly modifies her original translation of some passages in *Of Grammatology*.

deconstruction is always, in a certain way, swept away by  
[*emportée par*] its own work.<sup>20</sup>

The irreducible subjectiveness of *différance* would therefore mean that the subjective is not necessarily a force outside of things (in the sense that it assumes a transcendental intentional force), rather, if there is anything irreducible about it, the point is the subjective is all there is to reality and therefore reality is too caught up, too absorbed in itself, too involved in its own operation such that it cannot claim absolute objectivity unless it assumes that the operation is already complete, that there is ‘nothing more’ in the sense that reality has finally reached a point where it is time to seize it, own it, make it function outside of itself, make it real in the most objective sense. But that can only matter as an illusion, and precisely it is just that—illusion takes precedence over the real. Yet, the beauty of *différance* lies in knowing that its founding of common sense, nay, of reality itself, is premised on the contingent, that it is not permanent, “always swept by its own work” in the sense that it can never see the entirety of its own operation. For the most part, it guesses, it hopes, it believes—it inhabits its own faith in the future of existence.

### The Truth of the Eating is Not on the Pudding

This time, let us try to connect *différance* and parallax to what we have been trying to say about the problem of eating well. In a nutshell, what sutures the two concepts is the one truth there is in eating—that its truth is not on the pudding, as Marx and Engels put it.

Earlier, in our discussion of Derrida, we tried to make sense of the figure of the chef in relation to a paradoxical commitment, namely, that one who eats must also give him- or herself to the other to eat, presumably, if one eats well, he or she gives well to the other. All is well until an idiot comes into the picture.

Let me propose a situation here on account of the idiot—that the difference between *différance* and parallax is a minimal one whose very essence is idiotic, vulgar, and obscene; all characteristics partake of the essence of the arbitrary. Let us imagine a situation here. The idiot arrives at a time when *différance* and parallax were eating each other well. Presumably, both are professional cooks on their own right. There comes

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

the idiot, always with a joke to start with. By the way he is not invited to dine with *différance* and parallax. He just barged in, the idiot that he is.

The idiot's joke, apparently of Russian origin, runs as follows: "Two men, strangers to each other, sit in the same compartment on a train. After a long silence, one addresses the other: 'Have you ever fucked a dog?' Surprised, the other replies: 'No, have you?' 'Of course not. I just asked to start a conversation!'"<sup>21</sup>

In this old Russian joke the arbitrariness of the idiot comes to the fore. He just asked to start a conversation, because, presumably, a conversation is in any case a necessity. You have to give in to this necessity in the same manner that one in any case must eat.

But what is idiotic about the way the unwanted visitor told the joke is that he is too consistent with his character. He arrived in the scene telling about fucking a dog. What a way to give in to necessity. But the idiot might well defend himself—he too knows how to eat and eat well. He knows the joke is a joke.

He jokes about the necessity of breaking silence, the necessity that, to paraphrase Derrida, "does not authorize silence" when Derrida talks about the "surplus of responsibility."<sup>22</sup> In Žižekian terms, this responsibility that Derrida speaks of may well be the kind of position so dear to the parallax, a position of responsibility towards the Real, and yet a responsibility that will always fall short of the Real.

To complicate the matter, the Real, as Žižek argues, is always positioned on the side of the symbolic, which is the site of human responsibility. Even more, and here is the argument of the parallax, there is "a Real not because the symbolic cannot grasp its external Real, but because the symbolic cannot fully become itself." In the situation I just proposed above, it is the idiot who introduced its theme to the dinner table. One has to break the silence by pointing out the fact that the Real is positioned on the side of the symbolic, that the Real, like it or lump it, demands that we give in to necessity. But this also indicates that the symbolic will always fall short, that eating well will always fall short of the

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<sup>21</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, "Eating Well," 17.

responsibility it wants to perform, that eating well is after all egoistic. Žižek continues:

There is being (reality) because the symbolic system is inconsistent, flawed, for the Real is an impasse of formalization.... The Real is nothing but the non-All of formalization, not its external exception.<sup>23</sup>

For his part, Derrida cites from Kafka's journals the following words which attest to the joke and despair of the symbolic in the form of writing, in any case the closest enterprise that approximates the nature of *différance*:

Writing's lack of independence of the world, its independence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live in itself, is a joke and a despair.<sup>24</sup>

To be fair, one can add: it is also dependent on an idiot who forces *différance* to accept its lack of independence of the world. *Différance* and parallax therefore share something in common and that is their reliance on the idiotic. On the one hand, *différance*, as it is always swept away by its own deconstructive work, unable to locate itself beyond the inside, is without origin<sup>25</sup> (if we understand origin as the 'before' of something else, both in terms of time and space, and therefore outside of something else's time and space); it cannot even locate itself within itself in the mode in which one can feel confident where one is. It becomes obvious in this case that *différance* has nothing to deconstruct except its own desire to locate an impossible site of its own affirmation, reminiscent of Freud's theory of pleasure:

Under the influence of the ego's instincts for self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the

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<sup>23</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 646.

<sup>24</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 272.

<sup>25</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex, Great Britain: The Harvester Limited Press, 1982), 11.

reality principle. This latter principle does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road (*Aufschub*) to pleasure.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, the idiot is right about *différance* that it does not have independence of the world, the world that in any case one has to find reasons to believe it exists. If this is so then necessity arrives at the scene where conceptual clarity gives way to a radical decision, at best, non-conceptual, namely, to believe in the future of a world without origin in the sense Freud recommends—to tolerate unpleasure, which, more than anything, means that we give in to the necessity of repressing our cannibalistic desire in order to save the last cannibal or, what is the same thing, the figure of hope for the survival of the species. On the other hand, the parallax builds on this principle of tolerating unpleasure in terms of replacing the object of desire (the pleasure principle) with a stand-in or, in Lacanese, the *objet petit a*, which in Žižek takes the form of the object of the drive itself. Desire or its real object gives in to the necessity of unpleasure which rather takes pleasure in an alternate object:

[The] drive does not bring satisfaction because its object is a stand-in for the Thing, but because the drive, as it were, turns failure into a triumph—in it, the very failure to reach its goal, the very repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object, generates a satisfaction of its own.<sup>27</sup>

Obviously, in all these instances, the idiotic assumes the role of a teacher.

### The Last Cannibal

So far, we have committed a crime by cannibalising Derrida and Žižek, in terms of reducing their differences into a singular problem—that

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<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 10. Quoted by Derrida in *Margins of Philosophy*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 498.

of doing well to eat. This is so far the highest injustice we could commit against them by denying each the right to differ from one another in the face of a necessity—that we must in any case eat. All the more when the most pressing issue that humanity is confronting today concerns food security.

But, there is also the opinion that human civilization facing the most challenging period of geo-entropy has gone past the stage of food security, making food available to everyone, especially, the poor, into a stage when food safety becomes the tall order of the day. This time it is no longer the issue of how to make ‘eating’ a universal right—remember, it is of necessity that we must eat, regardless of ‘who’ or ‘what’. But rather, the issue has been raised into a level in which safety concerns dictate the survival of the human race. We can express it in Derrida’s terms—the Good must be eaten well. But safety wise, the right Good must be made available to eating, and unfortunately, only to those who are in the best position to do well in eating, assuming that availability of food is out of the question in light of climate entropy and ecological disasters which impact on food sourcing. The point is to protect the last eater, the last cannibal, the last Man who is the key to the survival of the human race. But, already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Zarathustra warned us about the last man who lives a life of contentment and mediocrity.<sup>28</sup>

But with Derrida we feel the passion to pursue the infinite; the last is to-come,<sup>29</sup> to-come in terms of “a commitment to what is coming ... a pledge given to the other.”<sup>30</sup> It is by virtue of this pledge that the cannibal must prevent himself to eat the last cannibal, to complete the job of eating well, to proclaim the last God and the beginning of an era where necessity gives way to freedom, where ‘eating’ gives way to something else entirely. In his younger years, Derrida uttered the following lines in response to Jean Hyppolite after delivering his paper “Structure, Sign and Play” in a

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<sup>28</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> See John Caputo (ed.), “The Messianic Waiting for the Future,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 156-79.

<sup>30</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 167.

conference at Johns Hopkins University: “I am trying precisely to put myself at a point so that I do not know any longer where I am going.”<sup>31</sup> One can very well interpret these words as those of a cannibal restraining his appetite to eat the other.

### Cannibalistic Anthropocene or the Revelation of Last Things

We may argue here—by way of introducing a new but not isolated topic—that the deconstructive tone of Derrida’s statement (above) will have to meet its most difficult challenge in the era of the anthropocene.

The anthropocene, a term introduced into geological science by Nobel Prize winner, the Dutch chemist Paul J. Crutzen, means the state of the geological history of the planet when humans are now driving the course of evolution than was formerly the case, when evolution was determined by natural forces. The classical proof of this case is the degree to which human existence is now increasingly determined by technoscience and biopolitics, as Derrida also notes in the same interview, though unaware of this new coinage. But what is controversial in Crutzen’s claim is that humans are also altering the geological evolution of the planet, an enormous task that would appear impossible for humans to perform, like physically moving a planet. However, it is not a faulty claim if we consider how, for instance, human waste has gradually altered climate cycle trapping heat energy in the atmosphere. This entrapped heat introduces disequilibrium to a closed system like our planet, thereby making it more susceptible to chaos. More so, the geological effects of these patterns will have enormous impact on the way we view the fate of humanity in the decades to come.

If this effect eventually impacts on the heart of eating, of food availability, certainly the terms of eating will be drastically altered. The goal would be less of maintaining the collective integrity of the species vis-à-vis the threat of entropy or end times than it will be of sustaining the ‘who’ of the species. It becomes then the task of biopolitics to cut up the subject in the manner of choosing the fit. In an implosion like this, a revelation of last things becomes a critical barometer of freedom, or how freedom must be cut up by grafting it, to use Derrida’s words, to a desirable

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<sup>31</sup> See Sean Gaston, Ian Maclachlan (eds.), *Reading Derrida’s Of Grammatology* (London: Continuum, 2011), 198.

post-human end where the goal of a new philosophy of the subject is one of—“[Deciding] birth or death, including what is presupposed in the treatment of sperm or ovule, pregnant mothers, genetic genes, so called bioethics or biopolitics . . . organ transplant, and tissue grafting.”<sup>32</sup>

In Derridean terms, this entails the problem of how to cut up the human subject. And yet, even technoscience, which assumes the new philosophy of the subject in the era of poly-anthropophagy, is at a loss where precisely to cut up. Derrida says: “In spite of appearances, I am speaking here of very concrete and very current problems: the ethics and politics of the living. We know less than ever where to cut—either at birth or at death. And this also means that we never know, and never have known, how to *cut up* a subject.”<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, it does not discount the fact that the origin of humanity can be traced to the crime of cutting up, or cannibalism, if you will.

We are all cannibals to the last man. To the last man—there the illusion of reason trembles.

### The Cannibal Trembles

Let us digress for a while in order to examine this trembling in two ways.

On the one hand, reason trembles as it confronts an impossible demand. In the face of the revelation of the last things in the post-modern era of poly-anthropophagy, or the apocalypse of orgiastic cannibalism, reason becomes a dispensable meat. For that it must take on an ethical task, because it too must eat.

But in the face of the overabundance of flesh (human population has reached 7 billion and counting) reason cannot avoid what Derrida describes as “the surplus of responsibility” (. . .) “which will never authorize silence.”<sup>34</sup> As Derrida asserts,

For this surplus of responsibility that summons the deconstructive gesture (. . .) a waiting period is neither possible nor legitimate. . . [The] affirmation that

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, “Eating Well,” 115.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 118

motivates the deconstruction is unconditional, imperative, and immediate.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, reason trembles precisely at a point in which the posthuman revelation of last things, of the last gods, of the last flesh, the last meal, the last cut, the last of the lust for the cut, is casting the long veil aside that used to protect the primordial scene of necessity, the veil that used to cover the primordial cut, the dark hole in Being, the cut that separates us from our illusions.

In the most surprising example, we know why Nietzsche wept. Despite his taking precautions not to be cut up without a fight (his struggle against modernity), Nietzsche, like any one, was already a dead meat. The final lesson of Nietzsche is this: existence is not guaranteed of any ontological support. But it is at that point where a waiting period is neither possible nor legitimate, as Derrida asserts.

Nietzsche must eat. We must eat and do well to eat.

It is precisely the lack of support that makes existence possible.

We must eat—we must survive cannibalism. That, I suppose, is deconstruction in a nutshell.

### **The Secret of Deconstruction and the Economy of Cannibalism**

To survive cannibalism, Derrida offers the alternative of offering oneself death, which he also describes as an “offer of the gift of death”<sup>36</sup> to the other (the immediate proximate last cannibal). Derrida assures us, taking Abraham as an example, that this sacrifice assumes the final form of an ethical response: “I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all others.”<sup>37</sup> But what can one sacrifice in order that he or she can respond to others?

The answer is obvious from the standpoint of the economy of cannibalism, namely, that one must sacrifice or eat *an* other in order to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>36</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 68.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid..

preserve the last men. Here, the injunction not to eat the last man is affirmed. But the sacrifice also demands that one must eat the immediate other well, perhaps, with a better consumptive management in mind, enough to delay the turn to the next flesh. One may well interpret this as a sensible management of entropy. Like Abraham, a cannibal must sacrifice his most beloved son so that he cannot sacrifice others, so that he can save them. The sacrifice of the ethical to the absolute necessity of saving the last man (Isaac is the precise object of eating well or, which is the same thing, the others cannot take the place of Isaac who affords Abraham the opportunity to eat well, the opportunity for human flourishing) makes Abraham the epitome of the scandalous anomaly of *différance*:

[The] most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible of men, absolutely irresponsible because he is absolutely responsible, absolutely irresponsible in the face of men and his family, and in the face of the ethical, because he responds absolutely to absolute duty, disinterestedly and without hoping for a reward. . .<sup>38</sup>

One must discern this paradox outside of the theological sense it evokes. Needless to say, we are more inclined to embrace the logic of economy that binds the cannibal to the absolute principle of the survival of the species which has a counterpart in Derridean language whose absolute injunction allows no conceptual clarification as it takes the form of a natural principle—“the untranslatability of this formal economy functions like a secret within one’s so-called natural or mother tongue.”<sup>39</sup> Derrida describes this economy as an “inexhaustible operation,”<sup>40</sup> precisely because the consumption of the last cannibal is indefinitely deferred, in favor of the pure immanent continuity of life as an absolute economy (in favor of the greatest affirmation of human flourishing)

It is in this sense that ultimately for Derrida life can be secured against entropy by means of renouncing calculation. Seemingly, life rewards those who renounce calculation, as the case of Abraham illustrates

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 95.

when his son was saved in the last instant.<sup>41</sup> Simply put, Abraham did not calculate the loss and benefit of disobeying and obeying God's command. Calculation is renounced in the affirmation of the "very untranslatability of the formal economy."

In Žižekian terms, this untranslatability would acquire the sense of the undecidable (which is also a familiar concept in Derrida), most forcefully through the figure of the idiot to which we return full circle.

### Postscript

Assuming we cannot give in to necessity's ridiculous demands, let us see how Žižek will manage to save Derrida with a joke, with a good laugh. Here, a good laugh may bring us back to the immanence of necessity no matter how we abhor the disgusting ultimatum of eating well.

The joke centers on the theory of drive, which, in light of our previous discussions, amounts to the ethicality of saving the last for last in an indefinite deferral of sacrifice. But for Žižek through his reading of Lacan, after all, this deferral functions more productively as a kind of 'repeated oscillation'. Here is the joke (with which I would like to conclude this paper):

In the well-known vulgar joke about a fool having his first intercourse, the girl has to tell him exactly what to do: 'See this hole between my legs? Put it in here. Now push it deep. Now pull it out. Push it in, pull it out, push it in, pull it out. . . ' 'Now wait a minute,' the fool interrupts her, 'make up your mind! In or out?' What the fool misses is precisely the structure of a drive which gets its satisfaction from the indecision itself, from repeated oscillation. In other words, what the fool misses is Derrida's *différance*.<sup>42</sup>

### References

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<sup>41</sup> "[Isaac] is given back to him because he renounced calculation" (ibid., 97).

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, "A Plea for the Return to *Différance*," 132.

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