Good vs evil, life vs death, extrovert vs introvert, native-born vs immigrant: paired opposites like these inform our lives, and for many people are problematic. We share in creating divisions in reality along fault lines that our culture treats as natural joints of separation. Sometimes we’re left with horrific and unintended results, perhaps such as at the current conflict between Christian and Muslim. Are these conflicts inevitable, or are there other ways of looking at reality?

I began wondering about ways of dealing with oppositions, and thought that Derrida’s theory of deconstruction might be a good candidate.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930 - 2004) introduced deconstruction in his 1967 “book” Of Grammatology, which is the approach I’ll be focusing on here. Deconstruction can be an immense topic, way too much to cover in a short presentation. As a simplified approach, we’ll present a short sample text to deconstruct, and then limit ourselves to the several key deconstruction concepts needed to drill down and perform its deconstruction.

For a sample text, we’ve chosen a passage from Nietzsche’s The Gay Science, in which he discusses the indifference of the universe to organic life (Nietzsche, The Gay Science, §109). This text has the advantage that it’s relatively short, and hopefully relatively self-explanatory. Nietzsche was an important precursor to what was later called deconstruction, and much admired by Derrida. This particular text was actually noted in the G. Spivak’s excellent Translator’s Preface for Of Grammatology as a (pre-Derrida) instance of deconstruction.

Let us beware. Let us beware of thinking that the world is a living being...

... The astral order in which we live is an exception: this order and the relative duration which depends on it have again made possible an exception of exceptions: the formation of the organic. The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos ... But how could we reproach or praise the universe? Let us beware of attributing to it heartlessness or unreason or their opposites: it is neither perfect or beautiful, nor noble, nor does it wish to become any of those things ... [in nature] there are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know there are no purposes, you also know there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of purposes that the word “accident” has meaning. Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type. (emphasis added)

Reading this as deconstruction may involve the following. Terms key to Derrida have been placed in bold.

1. According to Derrida, our “perception”, in his sense that “perception” is what actually enters our consciousness, is not transparent: we do not directly perceive reality as classically described by Plato and Aristotle (for example, see Aristotle, De Interpretatione, § 1). Rather, our “perception” is not direct because it already includes interpretation. Heavily influenced by Freud, Derrida claims that our immediate sense data is re-formed/massaged by our unconscious to receive traces of our previous experiences from our culture (especially its language and history), emotions, family (Oedipal and otherwise), and other prior events before
it is passed on to the consciousness. We “perceive” a cup as a cup. We don’t first become aware of the sense data, and then conclude that this object is a cup, but “perceive” it initially, in our consciousness, as a cup.

The “perception” is a product of differance, a term coined by Derrida to mean that our “perception” differs from reality - either the external world or our own unconscious - which Derrida calls the Radically Other to emphasize its unknowability, and is deferred from that reality, since it arrives in the consciousness, not immediately, but only after passing through the unconscious.

Rather than studying reality objectively and arriving at clear concepts of what it consists of, its truth, each person interprets reality influenced by her own personal and cultural traces. In Derrida’s terms, we read reality not as a book - something with a single correct meaning/truth, but as a text, a field of signs to be interpreted and that can give multiple meanings.

Nietzsche is warning us against a particularly common interpretation: thinking of reality as a living being, reading it as a book that assigns anthropomorphisms to the universe. This includes considering the universe as the work of a Grand Clock-Maker, benevolent mother, demon/victimizer, Master Artist, etc.

2. Violent Hierarchy. Nietzsche offers in its stead another perspective. The Radically Other is chaos, and our quiet corner of the universe is actually an exception to the rule of a violent universe in conflict with itself. Think of black holes, exploding stars, galactic collisions, Big Bangs. The relative quiet in our area of the universe has permitted the development of organic life, but this is an unusual and rare anomaly, not what normally is occurring.

Organic life is obviously dear to us, and at the same time “fated” as it must also involve the cessation of that life. Life and Death are issues of ultimate concern. These issues for humans predate human language, but with the arrival of language something additional has happened. The Living and the Dead, Life and Death have become concepts, and have been reified, i.e., made into objects with existences/presences of their own.

The words of language are signs, and what a word is a sign of is called the signified, its concept and “meaning”, while the physical form of the sign - its sound or written form - is called the signifier. When a word appears in a discourse, we assume it refers to something that exists, otherwise the word would be meaningless. It refers to an existing thing, its signified. Derrida goes further - this signified is so real that in a sense it becomes present to us, it assumes a quality of Presence. As a result, through language we have populated our world with entities, each having its own being and presence, within human discourse. For example, think of Aristotle and his Realism, where each particular object has an independently existing substance (formed matter), and instantiates an existing Universal. We live in a Metaphysics of Presence, in which each entity in our world has its own conceptual, but solid, existence.

Life and Death, as words, are two such signs, and in Derrida’s thought each have a Presence. In this case, as in many others in metaphysics, these two are paired opposites. But humans arrange the two not only as a pair, but as an hierarchy, with the first term dominating the second, as in (Life, Death), (Good, Evil), (Truth, Error), in which humans “instinctively” value
the first term over the second. Derrida calls this construction a **violent hierarchy**, as our
human values strongly favor Life over Death, and protect its position. (Derrida, *Positions*, p 39)

This hierarchy can be seen as a result of differance. We confront organic matter, and select
living matter as the presence of interest. What remains is its absence, the non-living matter, a
“lack” of the material we’re really interested in.

3. **Reversal of the Hierarchy.** Nietzsche then does more: he reverses the order of the
hierarchy. Nietzsche’s working within the same hierarchy of organic matter, but overthrowing
the privilege that “Life” has. Showing that the reversal of the hierarchy comes within the logic
of the hierarchy itself is important to Derrida and a requirement of deconstruction. This has
always seemed the trickiest part of deconstruction.

The prevalent state of the universe is unorganized chaos, not living matter. The universe
primarily contains inert matter and energy, which overwhelms organic matter in terms of
abundance. Because of its absence of life, dead organic matter is more similar to the inert
universe than to the living. In this sense, dead matter dominates its living counterpart, which is
a rare anomaly to the way the universe is, and the hierarchy is reversed.

4. **Arrival of the “Under-Erasure”.** Under one interpretation, “Life” is dominant, and under
the other, “Death”. In Derrida’s deconstruction, these oppositions are emphatically not
resolved into a synthesis - that would be Hegel and his dialectic - but are maintained. Instead,
and this is incredibly important, we arrive at a more general, non-conceptual term that
preserves the opposition but negates it, which Derrida calls putting the term **under erasure**.
This is usually denoted by writing down the word to be erased, and then crossing it out while
keeping it visible. Derrida might call this term “generalized life” or, more likely, “generalized
death”, or **life or death**. Life/Death is non-conceptual and beyond the opposition between Life
and Death, which to Derrida are two concepts created in our minds through differance.

In a sense, we’ve moved beyond these oppositions. In the case of Christians and Muslims, we
arrive at a (“generalized religion”) religion beyond conceptual religions. Ditto for **race**, **gender**,
and **class**.

An obvious open question is how well Derrida’s project actually works. It’s heartening that his
work has found application in topics as diverse as post-colonialism (e.g., Gayatri Spivak, *A
Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*) and the
development of political justice (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/#Dec). Time will tell.