〔Article〕

Applications of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna and Jacques Derrida

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Abstract

抄録

　本論文は、これまで龍樹（ナーガールジュナ）とジャック・デリダの総体的な比較がなされてき
た様々な分野における諸研究について簡潔な考察を試みたものである。ここで取り上げる研究例の
すべてが直接的にこの両者の考えを用いているわけではないが、少なくともどちらかに深く影響を
受けている。しかしながらこれらの研究がなされた意義において、最も注目すべき点は、いわゆる
ニヒリズムと絶対主義という両極にある概念の間における「中論」の探求の必要性に示唆されてい
ることにある。ここでの「中論」とは、枠組みを超越した絶対的な存在がすべての物事、思考の根
底に価値や基準を与えていることを認める考えと、すべての物事に本質的な真理や一貫性はないと
する考えのどちらをも回避する立場で示される。調和、秩序、安定、本質、客観的、有意や永続性
といったものが絶対主義的な考えである一方で、多様性、闘争、無作為、非本質、主観的、無意味
そして絶え間ない変化、といったものがニヒリズムのそれに当てはまる。「中論」とはその相反す
るどの極端な概念にも捕われず、絶対的なよりどころを必要とせず、しかし流動的に物事に意味を
見出していける考え方と定義できる。以下にとりあげる研究は、様々なアプローチで「中論」の有
効性や有用性、そしてこの分野における比較論の将来的方向性を示している。

　　This paper will briefly examine several studies in a wide variety of different fields where aspects of a general comparison between Nāgārjuna and Jacques Derrida have been applied. Not all of these studies directly apply the thought of both of these figures but all of the following examples have been significantly influenced by at least one of the two. More importantly, however, is that all of these studies have been inspired by the need to discover a middle path between, in broad terms, the nihilistic and absolutist extremes as exist within these fields. The middle path, in this sense, represents avoiding the need to ground all action and thought on the foundation of an absolute and transcendent category of being that is the source of, and reference for all things, and avoiding the other extreme of denying all meaning and cohesion. The absolutist extreme is associated with unity, order, stability, being, objectivity, purpose and permanence, whereas the nihilist extreme is associated with exactly opposite categories: diversity, strife, randomness, non-being, subjectivity, meaninglessness and unrelenting change. The middle way, in striking a path between these sets of opposites, could be characterized as being a dynamic and meaningful way of living without a ground. In their differing ways the examples to follow both show the applicability and versatility of a middle way approach and point to a future direction for comparative studies of this sort.

1. Loy and "Cosmic Ecology"

In a 1993 essay entitled "Indra's Postmodern Net," David Loy points out that "Until recently, Western philosophy was largely a search for the one within the many, the Same that grounds Difference" (Loy 1993, 481). In the twentieth century, however, this project has largely been abandoned. Loy maps out one possible trajectory to trace this abandonment starting with linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

Saussure argues that the correspondence between signifier and signified, does not stem from any necessary connection, but is based on a complex set of conceptual and phonetic differences. Structuralist Roland Barthes takes Saussure's insights further by suggesting that all texts are really tissues of quotations – a place with no author-god but "a multi-dimensional space where a variety of writings blend and/or clash" (Loy 1993, 481). Derrida further adds that the meaning of such a space is never completed but is a "continual circulation of signifiers [that] denies meaning [to] any fixed foundation or conclusion" (Loy 1993, 481). No given text ever attains self-presence.

Loy, reflecting on this trajectory, significantly asks: "*What would happen if these claims about textuality were extrapolated into claims about the whole universe?*" (Loy 1993, 481). Loy suggests one image that might help to think about this question is that of Indra's Net found in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.

This sutra explains that in the heaven of Indra there is a great jewelled net that is infinite in all directions. A jewel is placed in each "eye" of the net. The jewels are also infinite in number.

> If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring. (quoted in Loy 1993, 481)

In Indra's Net there is an infinite interrelationship and infinite interpenetration between each thing. A centre cannot be found unless it is argued that the centre is everywhere. Loy notes that a host of similar metaphors can be found in the same sūtra, and especially in the Hua-yen tradition of Chinese Buddhism largely inspired by this *Flower Garland Sūtra*, and most notably in the writings of Fa-tsang (C.E. 643-712). Loy explains that the doctrines of this school represent a direct development of Nāgārjuna's teaching of emptiness. As all things are by nature empty of own-being, all things can be said to be interdependent on all other things. In this sense each thing can be said, like the jewels of Indra's Net, to penetrate, and be penetrated by, all other things. In both the teaching of Nāgārjuna and in the Hua-yen tradition things contain no beginning, no teleology, no creator and no end.

Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, explains this seemingly difficult doctrine in very simple terms: "If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either" (quoted in Loy 1993, 482). He adds that also in this sheet of paper it is possible to find the sunshine for the trees, the logger who cut the trees, the wheat for the logger's bread, the logger's father and mother and so on. "You cannot point to one thing that is not here – time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper… As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it" (quoted in Loy 1993, 482).

Loy brings light to the obvious and direct ecological and social implications of such a perspective that

arrives at a worldview that may be termed "cosmic ecology." He contrasts this view with the dominant, essentialist perspective of our era: "The environmental catastrophes which no longer threaten but are happening reveal, more clearly than any postmodern arguments can, the bankruptcy of essentialist thinking, both individual (the Cartesian myth of autonomous self-consciousness) and species (the anthropocentric bias that privileges *Homo sapiens* over all other life-forms)" (Loy 1993, 483). Instead, the wider perspective that Thich Nhat Hanh and others are pointing to, a vision that may be ultimately traced back to the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination, provides the deeply radical, yet highly practical solution to these types of problems. "Awareness of mutual identity and interpenetration is rapidly developing into the only doctrine that makes sense anymore, perhaps the only one that can save us from ourselves" (Loy 1993, 483).

　　Loy argues that this message of interpenetration, interdependence, and non-centrality holds obvious similarity to certain of Derrida's writings on deconstruction. Loy quotes the following passage that presents an image not unlike Indra's Net: "In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer simple origin" (quoted in Loy, 484). However, Loy continues to claim that Derrida is still trapped in textuality. He argues that "the textual dissemination liberated by Derrida's deconstruction will not be satisfactory unless the dualistic sense-of-self – not just its discourse – has been deconstructed" (Loy, 506).

　　By limiting himself to the deconstruction of discourse, Loy claims, Derrida contributes to the nihilistic assumption that life has no discernible meaning. In no way does Derrida approach the radical depths of Indra's Net. "Although Indra's Net is non-teleological, that implies not the meaninglessness of life but its *meaningfreeness*. Meaning may not be fixed, but it is not lacking" (Loy, 484). The non-centred groundlessness of Inrda's Net, where each jewel mutually influences and penetrates all others, itself being influenced and penetrated, actually allows for a deeper groundless grounding – "not in some particular, but in the whole web of interdependent relations" (Loy, 489). Instead of allowing oneself to fixate on a particular point, ground or principle, Buddhism seeks to dissolve these centres. It persists in "pulling the rug out from beneath us until we let go of that need for solid ground and discover that groundlessness is not so bad, after all" (Loy, 491). This ability to find contentment in groundlessness, and joy in decentring, is what distinguishes the middle path from both the false grounding of absolutism and the despair of nihilism. This version of the groundless middle path can be seen as the common connection between all of the following studies.

　　One might ask, however, if Derrida is as unduly concerned exclusively with language and textuality as Loy and others claim? Derrida himself specifically refutes these charges noting that he is continually "surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite" (Derrida 1997, 16) . Derrida scholar, John D. Caputo also denies that language is Derrida's only concern. Instead, Caputo points out that Derrida has always been motivated to go beyond Saussure's linguistic model. Caputo explains, "*différance* is not restricted to language but leaves its 'mark' on everything – institutions, sexuality, the worldwide web, the body, whatever you need or want" (Derrida 1997, 104). This is not saying that all things are linguistic – in fact, Derrida calls this error "linguisticism." "Rather, he is arguing that, *like* language, all these structures are marked by the play of differences, by the 'spacing' of which *différance* is one of the names" (Derrida 1997, 104). It is for this reason of avoiding the limitations of linguisticism that Derrida writes of traces and not signifiers. His analysis

is certainly not limited to language as his later writings clearly show. This insight brings Derrida a lot closer to Indra's Net than even Loy will admit. This also provides a direct response to Huston Smith's critique of linguistic holism as being analogous to potted trees separated from the nutrition supplied by their inter-connection with natural eco-systems (Smith, 662). Derrida sees no such separation of language from the rest of life, nor does he favour one over the other.

2. O'Leary, Abe and Theological Applications

Theologian Joseph Stephen O'Leary has applied the ideas of both Nāgārjuna and Derrida in his attempt to reformulate Christian theology. Nāgārjuna offers a way to see the conventional and provisional nature of the terms of theology, thus avoiding their reification, which subsequently allows for the strengthening of faith. Derrida's perspective, in its turn, allows theologians to see the provisional nature of their religion in cultural and historical senses. Both, in O'Leary's view, have the effect of enhancing rather than diminishing Christian theology and open it up to meaningful discussions and transformation with and by other religions and perspectives that it often has felt threatened by. This is perhaps one of the most important practical applications of this type of comparative exercise.

Another attempt at an inter-religious dialogue, and the application of similar middle way comparisons, can be found in Masao Abe's *Divine Emptiness and Historical Fullness*. Abe initiates, or at least continues, a conversation between Buddhism and Christianity that takes place especially in the light of the mutual challenge of contemporary anti-religious criticism. Abe specifically isolates two types of criticism, scientism and nihilism in the Nietzschean sense, as being particularly threatening to modern religions. Scientism is the belief that the scientific method is the only valid epistemology and, therefore, religion is invalid. Heidegger best explains Nietzsche's sense of nihilism: "Nietzsche thinks of nihilism as the 'inner logics' of occidental history.… The names of God and Christian God in Nietzsche's thought are used as the designation for the supersensible world in general … the phrase 'God is dead' means: the supersensible world is without active power. It dispenses no life" (quoted in Abe, 29). Nihilism is the realization that the highest values have depreciated and become deprived of meaning. This nihilism, for Abe, is a "nihilism beyond religion" which makes it deadly for all faiths. Both Buddhism and Christianity must deal with this critique. Abe does this with comparative interpretations of the teachings of both religions that reveal a middle way between nihilist and absolutist extremes.

Abe points to a certain passage in Phillipians (2:5-8) that relates the fact that Christ utterly emptied himself of God and suffered and died on the cross. This self-emptying is called Christ's *kenosis*. This *kenosis* is, if we reflect, the reason that we know Christ is the Son of God. "The Son of God is not the Son of God (for he is essentially and fundamentally self-emptying); precisely because he *is not* the Son of God he *is* truly the Son of God (for he originally and always works as Christ, the Messiah, in his salvational functioning of self-emptying)" (Abe, 33).

But if God the Son has emptied Himself utterly, Abe asks, does this not also mean that God the Father also empty Himself? The two are interdependent. Because God is Love, God also sacrificed Himself to everything like Christ. "God is God, not because God had the Son of God take a human form and be sacrificed while God remained God, but because God is a suffering God, a self-sacrificial God through total

kenosis" (Abe, 39). This "kenotic" or self-emptying and self-sacrificing God is, for Abe, "the true God" and it is because of God's total emptying self-sacrifice, indicating a profound love for all, that all nature and humanity is granted salvation (Abe, 39).

"This kenotic God is the ground of the kenotic Christ" (Abe, 39), and it is only this idea of the "kenotic God" that can overcome the nihilist critique of Nietzsche. This idea is more radical than Nietzsche's critique because "instead of being sacrificed for nothingness by radical nihilists… the kenotic God sacrifices Godself not for relative nothingness but for *absolute* nothingness, which is at one and the same time absolute Being" (Abe, 39) This has the effect of going beyond Nietzsche's nihilist criticism of Christianity and "deepening the religious significance of the Christian notion of the love of God" (Abe, 39).

The concept of the kenotic God thus allows Christians to realize, along with Buddhists, that absolute nothingness is the groundless ground of all things. God then empties himself into "each and every thing." This is not pantheism, in Spinoza's sense, because it implies a personal God within everything – not an impersonal abstraction. Indeed, the kenotic God is both impersonal and deeply personal because He acts out of inconceivable love for all. He is at once both immanent and transcendent and neither. Abe asks:

> If this total identity of God with the crucified Christ on the cross is a necessary premise for Christian faith, why is this total identity with Christ through God's kenosis not applicable to everything in the universe beyond Christ? Can we not legitimately say that each and every thing in the universe is also an incarnation of God together with Jesus Christ on the cross and his glorious resurrection? (Abe, 41)

This radical affirmation of the infinite nature of each and all, and all in each, holds obvious similarities with Indra's Net.

Abe finds clear parallels in this view with the teaching of emptiness in Buddhism. "Sunyata indicates *boundless openness* without any particular fixed centre. Sunyata is free not only from egocentrism but also from anthropocentrism, cosmocentrism, and theocentrism. It is not oriented by any kind of centrism. Only in this way is 'emptiness' possible" (Abe, 53). Abe feels that the notion of the self-emptying kenotic God is precisely what would allow Christianity to escape these types of centrism – especially theocentrism.

Śūnyatā, like the kenotic God, is self-emptying and self-negating, Abe writes it with an X through it, and thus allows even for a dualism within non-dualistic emptiness. The problem with this teaching of emptiness in Buddhism is that the dynamic nature of emptiness is not stressed. Emptiness should be taken as a verb not a noun. "For it is a dynamic and creative function of emptying everything and making alive everything" (Abe, 57). By viewing emptiness as static, Buddhism does not open itself up to rational thinking but only attempts to transcend it. This for Abe is unfortunate, as it leaves itself open to an attack by scientism, and this dynamism or evolutionary approach is something that can be learned from Western thought. Dynamic emptiness also allows for a greater emphasis on free will and especially on the free will to act lovingly or compassionately. Compassion is highly important in Buddhism but its role, given a static view of emptiness, is often overshadowed by wisdom.

As a summary of his inclusive theology, Abe writes:

> I have suggested that in Christianity, the notion of the kenotic God is essential as the root-source of the kenotic Christ, if God is truly the God of love. I have also suggested that in Buddhism, Sunyata must be grasped dynamically not statically, for Sunyata indicates not only wisdom but also compassion. And when we clearly realize the notion of the kenotic God in Christianity and the notion of the dynamic Sunyata in Buddhism – without eliminating the distinctiveness of each religion but rather by

deepening their respective unique characters – we find a significant common basis at a deeper level. (Abe, 87)

This in turn provides a view of both Christianity and Buddhism that both deeply challenges the assumption of a transcendent, permanent Absolute beyond this world, and takes the nihilist critique beyond itself in a complete affirmation of groundless nothingness. Whether or not Abe's synthesis would convince practicing Christians or Buddhists is slightly doubtful, but it is a welcome attempt at an open, inclusive religious perspective without foundations or exclusive centres.

3. Dallmayr, Derrida and the Middle Way in Geopolitics

Fred Dallmayr notes the seriousness of Abe's quest for a middle way between these two extremes. Dallmayr writes: "In Masao Abe's view, traditional Western philosophy is largely (with a few exceptions such as Meister Eckhart) impaled on the two dilemmatic horns of metaphysics: substantive-objective being or subjectively grounded will and freedom" (Dallmayr, 182). Nāgārjuna, for Abe, represents a middle way between the Western categories of object (or "Being") and subject (or "Ought"). Abe calls *śūnyatā* as "the *third* fundamental category, differing from both Aristotelian 'Being' and the Kantian 'Ought'" (quoted in Dallmayr, 183). In this way, also, Abe asserts that beginning especially with Nietzsche and Heidegger, the West has seriously come to deal with "the question of 'non-being' or 'nothingness' (*Nichts*) which cannot be categorized as either 'Being' (*Sein*) or 'Ought' (*Sollen*)'" (quoted in Dallmayr, 184).

For Abe, Heidegger takes up the question of nothingness most seriously and profoundly in Western history especially in Heidegger's insistence that the *Nichts*, or nothingness be emphasized as being the basis for any discussion of Being (Dallmayr, 185). Echoing this view, and demonstrating its implications for everyday life, Abe writes "I think that 'everything is empty' may be more adequately rendered in this way: 'Everything is just as it is.' A pine tree is a pine tree; a bamboo is a bamboo" in the same way as 'you are you; I am I'" (Dallmayr, 186). Dallmayr explains that Abe, as well as other members of the Kyōto School like Nishitani, discover very encouraging signs of a nonfoundationist trend in recent Western thought that shuns the traditional metaphysics of rationalism and empiricism. This trend stems from Nietzsche and Heidegger and extends to "French philosophers from existentialism to deconstruction" (Dallmayr, 187).

Fred Dallmayr in *Beyond Orientalism*, brings this non- or anti-foundationalist perspective, which affirms a groundless middle way, to the scene of contemporary global politics. Dallmayr writes that because of an unintended effect of globalization a new "Copernican revolution," has taken place where "the Eurocentric world view of the past – with its corollaries of colonialism and 'orientalism' – has been replaced or at least challenged by the rise of a global arena in which non-Western cultures and societies are increasingly active participants in sharing the future of the world" (Dallmayr, ix). At the same time this transformation of the geopolitical scene has been assisted over the last century or more "by a more quiet, subterranean process: the internal self-questioning and self-decentring of European or Western thought" (Dallmayr, ix). This decentring, "subterranean process" has been a major theme for comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida – the latter representing one of the most recent and potent philosophical forces behind this process. It should be emphasized, however, that in this process Derrida is very conscious of his debt to Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Dallmayr explains that in 1955 during a symposium in Hawaii, Heidegger rallied against Western domination and standardization, and especially that imposed by technology (*gestell*). At the symposium

Heidegger proposed "planetary thinking" as an antidote to the nihilism engendered by Western technological civilization. He told the participants: "Again and again it has seemed urgent to me that a dialogue take place with the thinkers of what is to us the Eastern world" (quoted in Dallmayr, xiv).

Dallmayr suggests that this project of "planetary thinking" is also furthered by more contemporary figures like Derrida. In a recent work, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, Derrida writes that "Europe today is faced with a profound aporia of double injunction." On one side he cautions against Europe disintegrating into a vast "myriad" of "petty nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable" representing distinct, exclusive cultural and national identities. But he also strongly warns against another extreme whereby Europe begins to become "the capital of a centralizing authority" which employs "trans-European cultural mechanisms," in order to "control and standardize" both those cultures that compose it and beyond to the entire globe (quoted in Dallmayr, xv). Dallmayr sees this analysis as an advocacy of a middle way between the absolutism of a centralized and standardized global or regional super-state and the nihilistic strife involved in the collapse into constantly competing "petty nationalisms" – an obvious and disturbing example of this being the events in the former Yugoslavia.

In this way Derrida's "injunction erects a barrier both against assimilationism or 'melting-pot' universalism, on the one hand, and against cultural narcissism, on the other" (Dallmayr, 57). Dallmayr suggests that this type of middle way between "the competing pulls of Western-style universalism and bellicose modes of ethnocentrism" that Derrida advocates, as well as other contemporary thinkers like Gadamer, opens up "a hopeful vista for the future" (Dallmayr, 59). This would be a vista which, in its emphasis on an open, inclusivistic "entwinement" of cultures and individuals, reveals a future "beyond the (mutual reinforcing) dystopias of global bureaucracy and of xenophobic fragmentation or exclusivism" (Dallmayr, 59).

In an open forum, edited into *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* by John D. Caputo, Derrida echoes these views: "We often insist nowadays on cultural identity – for instance, national identity, linguistic identity, and so on" He affirms that these struggles are at times "noble fights," but he stresses that people who struggle for these identities must be aware that "identity is not the self-identity of a thing" (Derrida 1997, 13). Instead, it must be realized that all identity "implies a difference within identity," so that "the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself; a culture is different from itself; language is different from itself; the person is different from itself" (Derrida 1997, 13). If this difference, which is both "inner and other," is acknowledged then it is understood "that fighting for your own identity is not …exclusive of another identity, [and] is open to another identity. And this prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism, and so on" (Derrida 1997, 13).

Derrida goes on to relate this openness to the other to a view of his own identity that is reminiscent of Buddhism: "It is because I am not one with myself that I can speak with the other and address the other. That is not a way of avoiding responsibility. On the contrary, it is the only way for me to take responsibility and to make decisions" (Derrida 1997, 14). In the same way, a state which is not open to the other, a state without respect for plurality – an "*unum*" "would be, first, a totalitarian state, and not only is this a terrible thing, but it does not work. We know that it is terrible and that it does not work. Finally, it would not even be a state. It would be, I do not know what, a stone, a rock, or something like that" (Derrida 1997, 15).

It is this view of the self that is not separate from the other, and identities that are not free of differences,

in other words a view of self and identity that are not seen as being independent, centralized wholes, each providing their own ground – as not possessing *svābhava*, that allows for the middle way perspective of geopolitics that Dallmayr and Derrida point to. Both extremes of exclusivist, petty nationalism or tribalism and assimilationist globalism aim to retain a view of identity that excludes all differences and the other.

In a separate essay in the same work, Dallmayr reflects on the global spread of Western style democracy in the light of the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, and sees this as another application of the middle way. He writes, "Just at a time of triumphant affirmation and emphatic insistence, democracy discovers in its own core a kind of negativity or non-affirmation, something that Eastern thought has traditionally described as 'emptiness' or '*śūnyatā*'" (Dallmayr, 175). According to Dallmayr, Nāgārjuna extends the Buddhist doctrine of the no-self to demonstrate that all things and beings possess a lack of self-nature or *svābhava*. This indicates a middle way between sameness and diversity, and the non-distinction of nothingness and the "manifold character of distinct phenomena" (Dallmayr, 177). For Dallmayr it can also point to a middle way between Eastern and Western thought and systems of society.

"Eastern or Asian thought is bound to be challenged by the progressive –historical thrust of democratisation and by the assertion of individual human rights (as endemic to liberal democracy); conversely, Western thought is prone to be upset or thrown into disarray by the radical tenor of political nonfoundationalism (as implicit in *śūnyatā*)" (Dallmayr, 176). Again, Dallmayr emphasizes that this type of "political nonfoundationalism" is the middle way that thinkers like Heidegger and Derrida are advocating.

David Loy in *A Buddhist History of the West* (2002), like Dallmayr, also employs Buddhist perspectives and contemporary nonfoundationalist theories which affirm middle way approaches, to address the unprecedented problems of the global situation. He provides this stark and depressing summary:

> According to the United Nations Development Report for 1999, three-fifths of the 4.4 billion people in developing countries lack basic sanitation, a third have no access to clean water, a quarter do not have adequate housing, while a fifth do not have enough food or access to modern health services. Today the richest 20 percent of the world's population now account for 86 percent of private consumption, the poorest 20 percent only 1.3 percent – a gap that continues to grow. As a result, a quarter million people die of malnutrition or infection every week, while hundreds of millions more survive in a limbo of hunger and deteriorating health …. (Loy 2002, 198)

Derrida echoes these bleak conclusions in a recent work, which definitively shows his concern for matters outside of the text: "Never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity" (Derrida 1997, 121).

Loy, like Derrida, lays the blame for all of these problems firmly at the feet of modern capitalism that, by absorbing and assimilating the traditional religions into powerlessness, commercialism and banality, has become a type of fundamentalist religion itself. Greed and delusion are the twin "values" of the new false religion and they are the two sources of many of the world's inequalities. Loy explains that the unrestrained market encourages and necessitates greed. "Desire for profit is necessary to fuel the engine of the economic system, and an insatiable desire to consume ever more must be generated to create markets for what can be produced" (Loy 2002, 207).

Obviously, from a traditional religious perspective, and this really lies at the heart of Buddhism, greed is treated as "a human trait that is unsavoury at best and unambiguously evil at its worst" (Loy 2002, 207). Loy sees this exposure of capitalism and its basis in greed, as the most important task of any religious

individual, regardless of their religion, in today's world. Loy holds that the "great sensitivity to social justice in the Abrahamic religions" must be combined with the insistence of "the Asian enlightenment traditions" on viewing the root causes of evils like greed as being the result of delusion and ignorance. "Moreover, I suspect that the former without the latter is doomed to be ineffective in our cynical age" (Loy 2002, 207-8). Loy argues that the solution to the environmental, social and political catastrophes that we are facing will happen when we learn to accept our situation, as individuals and societies, as being one of lack – as being a situation where no new ideology, or national identity, or consumer good, or higher GNP will end this sense of lack. He advocates a spiritual path that affirms our lack of foundations and in doing so liberates individuals and societies from the grasping mind that lies behind greed and delusion. "For the time being, that path includes struggling against the false religion of our age [the market]" (Loy 2002, 210).

John D. Caputo, commenting on Derrida's perspective on the contemporary global situation, also stresses the need to avoid the thinking that there is a centre or ground to global relations where truth emanates from:

> We need to avoid both the overtly self-enclosing, isolationist, protectionist nationalisms and also the crypto-nationalism of thinking that 'we' are the exemplary case, the central site of a worldwide web, the international paradigm, charged with setting the course that the rest must follow, that we – French or Germans, Americans or Europeans, scientists or philosophers, etc. – *are* the 'universal' or 'reason' set down on earth in order to set the course, to lead the way, to provide the heading. There would be, at bottom, nothing or no one to charge or authorize anyone to provide the heading. For there is, for Derrida, at bottom, no bottom, no *Geist* or *Sein* or *logos* or Divine Voice (whether it uses Hebrew or Arabic) to legitimate such leadership. (quoted in Derrida 1997, 122)

4. Varela and the Middle Way in Cognitive Science

Francisco Varela and his co-authors, in *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, focus on a vastly different field in which to apply the middle way, nonfoundationalist teachings of both contemporary theorists, like Derrida, and Buddhist thought influenced by Madhyamaka. By applying these ideas Varela hopes to enlarge the scope of the recent sciences of the mind in order to "encompass both lived experience and the possibilities for transformation inherent in human experience" (Varela, xv). Varela is not chiefly concerned with Derrida however, but instead readily admits his inspiration by French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in turn was strongly influenced by Heidegger. Varela does note, however, "In France, the tradition of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty is continued in authors such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Pierre Bourdieu" (Varela, xv). Merleau-Ponty is important for Varela's school of cognitive science, because of their common stress on "embodiment," which has the double sense as "both the body as a lived, experiential structure and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanisms" (Varela, xvi).

Varela explains that, in the West, there have been several philosophers and other thinkers since Nietzsche who have "challenged our received conception of the self or subject as the epicentre of knowledge, cognition, experience, and action" (Varela, xvii). However what is much more significant, according to Varela, is the appearance of this notion of the decentred subject within science, which still speaks as "the voice of authority in our culture to an extent that is matched by no other human practice and institution" (Varela, xvii).

However, from the perspective of Varela and his colleagues, the current approach of cognitive science is limited "because there remains no direct, hands-on, pragmatic approach to experience with which to complement science" (Varela, xvii). This means that the "spontaneous and more reflective dimensions of human experience" do not gain the attention by science that they deserve. Varela argues that these dimensions *have* been examined thoroughly and in a disciplined manner for an extended period of time, but that this examination falls far outside of Western scientific tradition. He refers, of course, to "the Buddhist tradition of meditative practice and pragmatic, philosophical exploration" (Varela, xvii). The text, therefore, proposes "to build a bridge between these two traditions of Western cognitive science and Buddhist meditative psychology" (Varela, xvii). Varela will concentrate on the Madhyamaka school, which he claims "was probably the most radically non-foundationalist understanding in human history" and "the school on whose insights all major subsequent Buddhist thought has relied" (Varela, xx).

Varela terms the mainstream objectivist version of cognitive science "cognitivism." There are a few basic assumptions of this position. The cognitivists assume that the outside world is "pregiven," which means that all of its relations and features exist in like fashion before, or *a priori*, to any act of cognition. Cognitive activity only creates mental representations of this pregiven world. Therefore, in this theory, the world is always seen as existing apart from the perceiver or cognitive agent, and it is only our mental representations of this world that we perceive and act upon.

The metaphor that Varela uses to characterize cognitivism, over and over again in the text, is the image "of a cognitive agent that is parachuted into a pregiven world. This agent will survive only to the extent that it is endowed with a map and learns to act on the basis of this map" (Varela, 135). The map in this case is "an innately specified system of representations – sometimes called a 'language of thought'" (Varela, 135). Varela compares this position of the cognitivist as "cognitive realist" to the realist in classical philosophy and her traditional opposition to the idealist. "This opposition is based in the traditional notion of representation as a 'veil of ideas' that stands between us and the world" (Varela, 136). Given this 'veil,' the realist assumes "that there is a distinction between our ideas or concepts and that which they represent, namely the world" (Varela, 136). It is this independent world which allows one to determine "the validity of our representations" (Varela, 136).

In contrast, the idealist argues that we are trapped in these same representations, which never allow us a true picture of the independent world. We have no way of knowing how far these mental representations match "reality." We only can assume that this independent world is the "object of our representations" (Varela, 137). The extreme of the idealist position is that even this idea of an outside world, from which we presumably attain our representations, is itself only another mental representation or "metarepresentation." Varela explains the implications of this extreme view: "Our sense of an outer ground thus slips away, and we are left grasping for our internal representations, as if these could provide a sure and stable reference point" (Varela, 137).

In this way, Varela argues that both the cognitive realist and idealist positions do not in any way reach beyond traditional theories of representationism. In fact, one of the leading exponents of cognitivism, Jerry Fodor, openly admits, "the *only* respect in which cognitivism is a major advance over eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representationism is in its use of the computer as a model of the mind" (Vvarela, 138). Varela and his colleagues represent an avoidance of both of these extremes that indicates a shift "away from

the idea of the world as independent and extrinsic to the idea of a world as inseparable from the structure of these processes of self-modification" (Varela, 139). This more recent perspective is called the "enactive" school of cognitive science. "The key point is that such systems do not operate by representation. Instead of *representing* an independent world, they *enact* a world as a domain of distinctions that is inseparable from the structure embodied by the cognitive system" (Varela, 140). Varela adds, "we must call into question the idea that the world is pregiven and that cognition is representation" (Varela, 140). The question then arises, however, of why people are unable to discard this idea of representationism "without falling into some sort of subjectivism, idealism, or cognitive nihilism?" (Varela, 140).

This unwillingness to give up the notion of cognitive representation is what Varela calls the "Cartesian anxiety." He explains that the Cartesian anxiety is really a dilemma: "either we have a fixed and stable foundation for knowledge, a point where knowledge starts, is grounded, and rests, or we cannot escape some sort of darkness, chaos, and confusion. Either there is an absolute ground or foundation, or everything falls apart" (Varela, 140). Outside of this ground for our perception and knowledge, which can be envisioned as an "island" of truth, "is the wide and stormy ocean of darkness and confusion, the native home of illusion" (Varela, 141).

Like Loy, who explains the need for both profit and consumer goods as grasping for a ground that can never be grasped, or attempting to fill a lack that cannot be filled, this type of "Cartesian anxiety" in our thinking about cognition also arises from our craving for an absolute ground. This ground is searched for in the outer world but when it cannot be found there it is searched for it in the mind – a sort of inner ground. "By treating mind and world as opposed subjective and objective poles, the Cartesian anxiety oscillates endlessly between the two in search of a ground" (Varela, 141). Varela explains that the present situation in Western, or even global thinking, is characterized by a feeling of deep scepticism towards the idea that a ultimate ground can be determined, but that instead of accepting or affirming this lack, contemporary thinking, given the Cartesian anxiety, drifts further and further towards nihilism. Here again, and this time within the field of cognitive science there is the recognition of the two extremes of absolutism and nihilism, the relation between them, and the sense that a middle path must be found between or beyond them affirming groundlessness.

The mood of gloomy, despairing nihilism arises when the ideal of the mind as a perfect mirror of nature is not satisfied by investigation and one returns to the idealist search for a ground within one's own mind. Both are characterized by the need for a solid foundation, and both lead directly to nihilism when, inevitably, no such foundation is found. Varela argues that this continual grasping for an inner ground is only part of a larger pattern of grasping for any sort of ground that also includes the idea that the ground can be found in an independent and pregiven world. In this, he reaches the same conclusions as Loy: "In other words, our grasping after a ground, whether inner or outer, is the deep source of frustration and anxiety" (Varela, 143).

This understanding directly leads Varela and his colleagues to the position of the Madhyamaka, where the grasping mind "is considered to be the root of the two extremes of 'absolutism' and 'nihilism'" (Varela, 143). Once again, as the grasping mind fails to find anything solid to grasp it recoils onto itself in despair "and clings to the absence of a ground by treating everything else as illusion" (Varela, 143). Madhyamaka, according to this interpretation, seems to anticipate the movement towards nonfoundationalism in the West and also these recent trends in cognitive science. Madhyamaka, according to Varela, both recognizes the absence of a grounded subject or self, and the absence of a ground in any pregiven, independent world. More

importantly, however, is that Madhyamaka recognizes the interdependence of absolutism and nihilism.

> Within the tradition of mindfulness/awareness meditation, the motivation has been to develop a direct and stable insight into absolutism and nihilism as forms of grasping that result from the attempt to find a stable ego-self and so limit our lived world to the experience of suffering and frustration. By progressively learning to let go of these tendencies to grasp, one can begin to appreciate that all phenomena are free of any absolute ground and that such 'groundlessness' (*śūnyatā*) is the very fabric of dependent coorigination. (Varela, 144)

Varela emphasizes that on a phenomenological level, "groundlessness is the very condition for the richly textured and interdependent world of human experience" (Varela, 144). This groundlessness, therefore, is not to be realized through philosophical insight and analysis but in living and experiencing from day to day. In this way, groundlessness is revealed in the very ordinary way we move our bodies within "a world that is not fixed and pregiven but that is continually shaped by the types of actions in which we engage" (Varela, 144).

In short, Varela and his colleagues see cognition as a continual series of embodied actions or movements where the individual is constantly and inseparably involved in "structurally coupling" with its environment. That is, just as cognition cannot be separated or held above the body, the individual, whether human or otherwise, can in no way be viewed as acting independently or in causal precedence to its environment. All evolves together in a process of "evolution as natural drift" where the individual, by its embodied cognition, "brings forth a world." Varela summarizes, "cognition in its most encompassing sense consists in the enactment or bringing forth of a world by a viable history of structural coupling" (Varela, 205). This process of "bringing forth a world," Varela compares to a path that is being created in the very act of walking on it. In the same way, our individual and collective worlds are continually unfolding in this very moment that we act within them. For this reason, it cannot be said that a grounding of cognition, in either an inner or outer world, can be found. Rather embodied individuals and their worlds are constantly evolving together. This does not allow for true foundations to arise.

Cognition, for this school of cognitive science, can thus be summed up as enaction, which is a "history of structural coupling that brings forth a world" and the actual science involves investigating the function of cognition that is "a network consisting of multiple levels of interconnected, sensorimotor subnetworks" (Varela, 206). While enactive cognitive science is still not the mainstream, which continues to fluctuate between objectivist or subjectivist perspectives, it is beginning to deeply influence "the inner logic of research" in such varied fields of "cognitive psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, evolutionary theory and immunology"(Varela, 213).

This renewed acceptance and application of a theory that is based on a nonfoundationalist and middle way approach is, according to Varela, a sign of the increasing acceptance of groundlessness throughout science and contemporary thought generally. For Varela, as for many other theorists we have looked at, "our historical situation requires not only that we give up philosophical foundations but that we learn to live in a world without foundations" (Varela, 218).

This historical requirement of living without foundations is precisely what leads Varela and others to Nāgārjuna. In his thorough outline of Nagarjuna's argument against perception in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (MMK)*, Varela concludes, "Nagarjuna's point is not to say that things are nonexistent in an absolute way any more than to say that they are existent. Things are codependently originated; they are completely groundless" (Varela, 223). Varela repeatedly stresses that the teachings of the Madhyamaka are obviously *not* the same

as enactive cognitive science nor, given the vast historical, cultural and motivational differences, could they ever be seen as being the same. However, cognitive science does have a lot to learn from Madhyamaka – both for the latter's acceptance of groundlessness, and the meditative techniques used to become aware of this, and for the realization that our historical situation is not wholly unique as at other times people were also deeply concerned with the need to live without grounds. Indeed, Varela finds it remarkable how the European critiques of foundations, due to the lasting influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger and recent movements in post-structuralist and deconstructive thought, have converged with both the enactive trend in cognitive science and "the Buddhist tradition and thought, based on experiencing the world with mindfulness/ awareness" (Varela, 230).

Varela finds, however, that contemporary traditions of thought largely consider groundlessness as a negative thing and they do not pose any means to live within this groundless world. "In the Madhyamika tradition, on the other hand, as in all Buddhism, the intimation of egolessness is a great blessing; it opens up the lived world as path, as the locus for realization" (Varela, 234). Varela feels that a big part of our unwillingness to be this affirming of a lack of ground is the sense that to deny an ultimate ground is to deny the notion of there being anything true or good in the world. He writes, "the reason that we almost automatically draw this conclusion is that we have not been able to disentangle ourselves from the extremes of absolutism and nihilism and to take seriously the possibilities inherent in a mindful, open-ended stance toward human experience" (Varela, 235). Inevitably this involves the interconnected relations between the two extremes which both separate us from the actual, "lived world." "In the case of absolutism, we try to escape actual experience by invoking foundations to supply our lives with a sense of justification and purpose; in the case of nihilism, failing in that search, we deny the possibility of working with our everyday experience in a way that is liberating and transformative" (Varela, 235).

Again, as we have seen throughout this paper, we find a need for a middle way, or what Merleau-Ponty has called an *entre-deux*, between these two extremes. Varela points out the growing sense of nihilism that permeates the art, philosophy and literature over the past century or so, and that it is nihilism that most threatens. This preoccupation with nihilism is occurring, he suggests – and we have seen he is not alone in this suggestion, not as an independent movement apart from absolutism or objectivism but precisely because of the profound interrelationship between this and nihilism. Both, he asserts in a way that echoes Loy, arise "from the grasping mind":

> Thus faced with the discovery of groundlessness, we nonetheless continue to grasp after a ground because we have not relinquished the deep-seated reflex to grasp that lies at the root of objectivism. This reflex is so strong that the absence of a solid ground is immediately reified into the objectivist abyss. This act of reification performed by the grasping mind is at the root of nihilism. (Varela, 240)

The nihilism, which Nietzsche first isolated in Europe, is through globalization and other factors now engulfing the entire world. It is a global issue but its source remains the same as when Nietzsche first wrote of it: "What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; 'why' finds no answer" (quoted in Varela, 243). Varela points out that Nietzsche's challenge to his society and the society of the future was to find a path and mode of being that affirms the lack of foundations while not crystallizing into a new foundation – even if this new foundation is the hardened stance that there are no foundations. Nietzsche, himself, attempted to overcome the challenge with his teachings of the eternal return and the will

to power. But as Nishitani and others point out, Nietzsche does not let go of the grasping mind. Western nihilism is "half-hearted" as it does not continue with its own logic "and so stops short of transforming its partial realization of groundlessness into the philosophical and experiential possibilities of sunyata" (Varela, 244).

Nishitani realizes that Western culture should not necessarily adapt Buddhism to do this, but it should reach this understanding through our own "cultural premises." For Varela, these premises can be found in science and especially enactive cognitive science (Varela, 244). Varela however realizes that this cannot fully succeed without the meditative techniques of the Buddhist mindfulness/awareness tradition. In this tradition there is something else that science has been lacking, but is something that naturally emerges when a groundless, ego-less perspective is fully accepted. This is compassion and openness to the other. He writes, "The realization of groundlessness as nonegocentric responsiveness, however, requires that we acknowledge the other with whom we dependently cooriginate" (Varela, 254). We have seen this necessity for openness to the other also emerges in the writing of others stressing a nonfoundationalist approach – especially in the work of Loy and Derrida.

Conclusion

From Loy's reflection on Indra's Net as a comparison to recent discussions on textuality, and in the light of a "cosmic ecology," to the inclusive, groundless theologies of O'Leary and Abe, to discussions of the present political, social and economic problems on a global scale, and finally to the approach of enactive cognitive science, we have seen an emphasis on a middle way between forms of nihilism and absolutism. These clearly show the positive and very practical applicability of this type of comparison of figures like Derrida and Nāgārjuna. In each of these diverse, yet over-lapping fields there is a growing recognition for the need to affirm the groundlessness that we exist within. None of these fields claim that contemporary theory or various branches of Buddhism are equivalent, nor do they assert that in their field they present the definitive, final interpretation of either. Instead, they acknowledge that from both of these radically different perspectives, especially of Derridean deconstruction and Madhyamaka, insights and practical tools can be gleaned with which to live within a groundless world.

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