Neither nihilism nor absolutism:
On comparing the middle paths of Nāgārjuna and Derrida

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines several recent comparisons made between the writings of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. The main question under examination is why in particular should such a comparison of two widely different thinkers hold obvious appeal for contemporary scholars? In an attempt to answer this question the comparisons of Robert Magliola, David Loy, Harold Coward and others are analysed as are critiques of this type of comparison presented by Richard Hayes, A. Bharati and others. It is concluded that the basis for these comparisons is a strong concern for a "middle way" perspective between forms of absolutism and nihilism in contemporary Western culture.

RÉSUMÉ

La présente étude examine plusieurs comparaisons récentes faites entre Nāgārjuna et Derrida. La principale question examinée est la suivante : pourquoi une telle comparaison de deux penseurs largement différents intéresse-t-elle les chercheurs modernes ? Dans une tentative pour répondre à cette question, les comparaisons de Robert Magliola, David Loy, Harold Coward et d'autres auteurs sont analysées ; ainsi que les critiques de ce type de comparaisons écrites notamment par Richard Hayes et A. Bharati. La conclusion formulée est que dans la base de ces comparaisons se trouve un intérêt marqué pour la « voie de milieu » entre l'absolutisme et le nihilisme dans la culture occidentale contemporaine.

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INTRODUCTION

When a religious scholar encounters a text, especially when the text is written in an ancient language and comes from a place, time and culture radically different from the scholar's own, she or he must immediately face the task of interpretation – translation initially, or if the text has been previously translated she must in any case interpret the text's meaning. Inevitably the scholar's interpretation will be clouded, explicitly or implicitly, by the scholar's own various presuppositions and biases – be they cultural, philosophical, psychological or political. These, in turn, in all likelihood will vary in differing degrees to the presuppositions evident in other scholarly interpretations of the exact same text. Such different interpretations of the same text can for the most part be easily grouped according to various schools of thought that the individual scholars sympathize with.

This is even more the case when original religious or philosophical texts are compared with other texts of very dissimilar backgrounds. It is quite often true that the same text will be compared by different scholars to a wide variety of, and in some cases seemingly opposite, philosophical schools and individual philosophers. This phenomenon is certainly evident within the Western interpretive and comparative analyses of Nāgārjuna's treatises and especially his *Mulamādhyamikakārikā* (*MMK*). The work of examining these various interpretations of Nāgārjuna has been undertaken to a great extent by Andrew P. Tuck.

In his 1990 study, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship,* Tuck sets out to examine the crucial importance of interpretation in comparative philosophy. He opens his preface with the statement:

> It is a commonplace of contemporary scholarship that any theory or interpretation necessarily reflects the assumptions of its author and its readers. As the aims, conscious and unconscious, of scholars change, their readings are – sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, always productively – isogetical: they reveal far more about the views of scholars and their scholarly eras than exegesis is said to do. (Tuck, v)

In order to fully develop his argument, Tuck focuses on the numerous and changing interpretations of Nāgārjuna in the West. Indeed he subtitles his text, *On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna*. Tuck's work will be crucial in the present study.

Within the last twenty years a particular comparative interpretation of Nāgārjuna has prominently arisen in certain Western academic circles. This interpretation is based on supposed resonance in Nāgārjuna's philosophy with the deconstructive methodology of French post-structuralist Jacques Derrida. Tuck places these recent comparisons within the context of an ongoing and unfolding engagement of Nāgārjuna's writing with a host of Western interpreters each representing a particular current of Western thought. Tuck makes no claim to definitively present the precise motivations and presuppositions of each scholar offering an interpretation. Such a task would be too wide-ranging in its scope and in practical terms impossible. Instead, Tuck focuses on general philosophical or intellectual trends and fashions in the West and demonstrates how particular interpreters were affected by these trends.

The present study both borrows this methodology of Tuck and at the same time significantly narrows his approach by exclusively examining the writings of proponents and critics of comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. In this manner, the essays of scholars such as Robert Magliola, David Loy, Harold Coward and others will be examined not in terms of their very individual motivations, backgrounds and presuppositions, which vary widely from scholar to scholar. Instead these essays will be looked at in general regard to the relatively recent phenomena of the Derridean or deconstructive interpretation of Nāgārjuna.

The central question of this study is why so many scholars of recent years have chosen to compare such obviously different figures as Nāgārjuna and Derrida. It will be shown that this line or field of comparison is being conducted to establish the resonance between the "middle way" avoidance by Nāgārjuna of the destructive extremes of nihilism and absolutism, and a similar species of "middle way" that characterizes the deconstructive approach of Derrida. That so many scholars have and are continuing to point out the resonance between such widely

diverse figures at this time suggests that this question of a middle way between forms of absolutism and nihilism bears relevance in contemporary Western culture. Why this should be the case is an important theme in this paper. Philosopher Hilary Putnam argues that because of certain developments of culture, philosophy and science in the West, and especially over the last two centuries to an accelerating extent, we have been forced by our historical situation to "live without foundations":

> Science is wonderful at destroying metaphysical answers, but incapable of providing substitute ones. Science takes away foundations without providing a replacement. Whether we want to be there or not, science has put us in the position of having to live without foundations. It was shocking when Nietzsche said this, but today it is commonplace; *our* historical position – and no end to it is in sight – is that of having to philosophize without 'foundations.' (quoted in Varela, 218)

Certain writers have designated this singular "historical position" as "postmodern." What is meant by this term continues to attract debate but most now associate it, in Putnam's sense, as the present era in which traditional grounds or foundations have been for various reasons discarded. "Simplifying to the extreme," writes French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, xxiv). The "metanarratives" he refers to are foundational principles, the grand stories that are behind or beyond all other narratives, which provide a metaphysical ground for all things. To be incredulous toward, skeptical of, challenging to, or simply indifferent to metanarratives is what most readily characterizes the present postmodern condition. From this perspective, which Putnam traces back at least as far as Nietzsche, the foundational principles of the past that have been the traditional cornerstones of Western culture, such as God, Reason, Progress, the Subject, the Real, etc., have been by science or philosophy or other historical circumstances thrown from their privileged pedestals. In other words, the old "Absolutes" have been cast aside and we are left with nothing else to substitute for them. This is our situation.

As Nietzsche first forewarned this is an alarming and intolerable situation for many. Without a grounding Absolute, it is argued, there is no purpose and there

is no basis for order or ethics – everything becomes relative and therefore equally meaningless. Nietzsche predicted, as we shall see in the first chapter, that this would directly lead to nihilism. There seems to be two ways to respond to the postmodern situation. Either a new absolute must be enthroned to provide purpose and centre existence, or we must collectively sink into the despair of a groundless, relative nihilism where no one thing is honoured beyond any other, and each is only out for him- or herself according to the whims of the moment.

I will argue here, however, that the scholars engaged in comparative studies of Nāgārjuna and Derrida base their comparisons on the understanding that these two widely different thinkers from vastly different historical circumstances both point to a middle path between the extremes of absolutism and nihilism. This middle position is not a compromise between the two but rather a rejection of both as closed positions in favour of a position that is both affirmative and open. It rejects the absolutist declaration that "There is meaning. This (*X*) is what provides meaning" as well as the nihilist assertion that "There is *no* meaning." The middle way, by showing the absurdity of both, does not allow itself to be closed by either extreme. The middle way, for these writers, is precisely what is needed to live affirmatively in our present groundless condition. Both Nāgārjuna and Derrida point to this way.

In Tuck's terms, therefore, it may be possible to conduct an "*isogesis*," which he clarifies as "a 'reading into' the text that often reveals as much about the interpreter as it does about the text being interpreted" (Tuck, 10). This term "*isogesis*" which Tuck uses throughout his work and by which he clearly wishes to contrast to *exegesis*, may, I am told, be more faithfully rendered by the compound *eisegesis* composed of the Greek roots "*eis*" (into) and "*hegesthai*" (to lead). The meaning of *eisegesis* more accurately depicts Tuck's definition of "*isogesis*" than does the latter term which does not have a correct Greek equivalent. This paper will, therefore, employ the term *eisegesis* whenever Tuck's term "*isogesis*" is required.

Here again the texts in question are a number of comparisons made between Derrida and Nāgārjuna, and the relevant eisegetical reading is that the

texts reveal a great concern for a middle way within current Western thought and culture. It is significant that Tuck's research, which covers a wide range of Western interpretations of Nāgārjuna, shows that a middle way interpretation of Nāgārjuna is a very recent phenomenon in the West if not among Asian interpretors. Since the nineteenth century, when Nāgārjuna's writings were first examined in the West, Nāgārjuna has been interpreted, in different instances, as both a nihilist and an absolutist according to the philosophical trends of the time. It is also significant that within the career of Jacques Derrida, interpreters of his work have also labelled him at times a nihilist and at other times a sly type of absolutist who employs a pernicious species of negative theology in his work. As we will see, the comparators of Derrida and Nāgārjuna have by no means reached a consensus as to how closely either of the two figures follows the middle way. Some complain that Derrida is too much of a nihilist, others complain that Nāgārjuna is actually an absolutist, while others tend to identify the two. All of these scholars are united only by their quest for the middle way.

In the initial section of the first chapter, therefore, Tuck's text will be used, with some support from Richard Hayes, to examine past Western interpretations of Nāgārjuna as Nihilist, Nāgārjuna as Absolutist, and the philosophical presuppositions that inform these views. This section will then turn to more recent interpretations of Nāgārjuna as Philosopher of the Middle Way.

In the section that follows, before turning to interpretations of Derrida's thought, the stage will be set to investigate the abandonment of absolutism in Western thought and culture and the problems that nihilism represents accordingly. This investigation will briefly focus on two seminal figures in this philosophical development, Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of which were huge influences on Derrida. This section will be informed greatly by Nishitani Keiji's *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism.*

The second chapter looks directly and in depth at the comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. This chapter is the central chapter of the study and is therefore quite lengthy. It examines the initial or "pioneer" major comparisons written by Magliola, Loy and Coward which concentrate on similarities and

differences in the two thinkers' perspectives on identity, causality, rival schools of thought, and language and so on. The debates between the three comparators are highlighted but it is emphasized that all three are deeply concerned with the responses of Nāgārjuna and Derrida to the extremes of absolutism and nihilism.

This chapter next turns to a similar comparison by Ian Mabbett before turning to several comparisons by Odin, Dilworth, Huntington, O'Leary and Wang that compare the two thinkers, or different aspects of their thought, in the contexts of wider comparisons of distinct issues. It is noteworthy, however, that all of these secondary comparisons also accentuate the importance of the middle way.

Chapter Three draws attention to certain criticisms levelled against the comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. Richard Hayes addresses certain flaws in Nāgārjuna's logic and concludes that these flaws have directly led to faulty Western interpretations and comparisons. A. Bharati argues that the two thinkers are just too different to be valuably compared. Two other criticisms by Huston Smith and Carl A. Raschke do not directly comment on the comparison in question, but they make general criticisms against any "postmodern" interpretation of religious thought. A theme that emerges from this chapter is the concern that deconstructive or "postmodern" approaches to religious, and in this case Buddhist, philosophy are necessarily nihilistic. It will be argued that what these critics consider nihilistic is really an attack on both absolutist and nihilist extremes. It is further argued in the face of those who contend that Nāgārjuna and Derrida are simply too divergent for fruitful comparison, that this type of middle way comparison, however accurate or inaccurate, has wide application. This is the central concern of the final chapter.

The fourth chapter assembles a number of practical applications of the middle way comparison of different aspects of the thought of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. David Loy will again be consulted especially in regard to his application of the thought of Nāgārjuna and developments of the latter's thought in subsequent Mahāyāna Buddhism, and recent movements in Western linguistic philosophy including Derrida, to a deeper understanding of our relationship with life that Loy calls "cosmic ecology." It next examines two middle way approaches to problems

in contemporary theology as outlined by O'Leary and Abe Masao. The application of the middle way approach to geopolitics will be examined next covering recent works by Derrida, Loy and Fred Dallmayr. This section will compare absolutist views with recent trends to establish global centralized government, the so-called New World Order, and the corresponding nihilist trend of disintegrating nation states into mutually exclusive, hostile cultural, ethnic, and religious sub-groups. The final section of this chapter will look at the work of Francisco Varela and others in the field of cognitive science and show how middle way perspectives in Buddhism and contemporary Western theory can be applied by cognitive scientists to arrive at a position radically different from the traditional extremes of objective or subjective representationalism. Varela frequently points out the relation of these two with absolutism and nihilism. It will be demonstrated, through these examples, that a middle way approach may be very fruitfully applied to a variety of fields of study.

CHAPTER ONE: Eisegesis and Interpretaion

1.1) *Nihilist, Absolutist and Middle Way Interpretations of Nāgārjuna*

According to Tuck's research, the first major translator, and hence interpreter of Indian Mahāyāna writings was a member of the Société Asiatique of Paris, Eugène Burnouf. Burnouf was the first Western scholar to translate ***nirvāna*** as "extinction" which clouded his appraisal of Buddhism, and consequently influenced the learned opinions of many European scholars of his era in their conclusion that Buddhism is an essentially life-denying, negative religion. "Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Buddhisme indien* (1844) and his annotated translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkam* (*Le Lotus de la bonne loi,* 1852) firmly established the idea throughout Europe that Buddhism was a religion of negativity and nihilism" (Tuck, 33). Burnouf's negative views of Buddhism in general were sharpened when he came to Madhyamaka thought, which he encountered through his translation of Candrakīrti's commentary (the *Prasannapadā*) on Nāgārjuna's *Mulamādhyamikakārikā* (*MMK*). Tuck points out that Burnouf "saw, in

Nāgārjuna's thought in particular, the clear expression of an unqualified philosophical nihilism" (Tuck, 33).

Other European authors of the time "read Burnouf's speculations about the nature of *nirvāna* and went even further toward developing the negative 'annihilationist' reading of Buddhism" (Tuck, 33). Max Müller was deeply affected by this view, as was Jules Barthelemy Sainte-Hillaire. Sainte-Hillaire proclaimed Buddhism as "a monstrous enterprise in which every potential service to mankind is sterilized by a pervasive nihilism" (quoted in Tuck, 33). This perception of Buddhism, and Madhyamaka particularly, as nihilism became so engrained in the minds of nineteenth century European scholars and the public in general that few dared to challenge it.

Tuck explains that the reason for this revulsion towards Buddhism cannot be explained away as simply the result of a general prejudice towards Indian religion and philosophy. In fact, Hindu philosophy, and Vedānta especially, enjoyed quite a devoted following in the nineteenth century. Buddhism, and Madhyamaka in particular, was denied as nihilism specifically because it was seen to deny the ontological foundations, namely *ātman* and *Brahman*, of Hindu thought that precisely appealed to the European imagination. The intellectual culture of Europe at that time was dominated by a form of transcendental idealism inspired by the philosophies of Kant and Hegel. From this perspective, Kant's notion of the "transcendental ego" and Hegel's "*Geist*" directly paralleled the Indian concepts of *ātman* and *Brahman*. What all these varied concepts have in common, if nothing else, is the ability to provide the ground necessary to make any sense of reality. Tuck explains the high stakes involved:

> However much an idealist asserted that all of experience was constituted by the forms and categories of the understanding, there was always the existence of the constituting agent, the transcendental ego, which was foundational. Without at least this existential ground, there could be no epistemology. Without some ontology, philosophy was nonsense. (Tuck, 35)

By seeming to deny all such grounds Buddhism was seen to represent this type of nonsense. Buddhism did not make sense precisely because Buddhism did not make sense to the philosophical trend of the time. "German idealism presented

a lens through which the Indian philosophical tradition appeared to have been duplicating the latest "discoveries of the great European thinkers" (Tuck, 19). Buddhism, and especially Madhyamaka, was seen as a significant deviation that directly challenged the Indian tradition and in doing so ran contrary to European philosophical "discoveries." The most convenient way to address this significant challenge to the accepted wisdom was of course to dismiss it as being irrelevant, meaningless and/or dangerous. The label of "nihilism" affixed to Madhyamaka appropriately provided an excuse for its dismissal. In this dismissal scholars followed Burnouf until the early part of twentieth century. Guy Welbon points out that "Burnouf's opinion about Nāgārjuna and the prajñāpāramita literature was the standard until the great dispute between Louis de La Vallée Poussin and Th. Stcherbatsky. That is to say, no nineteenth-century author attempted to make a case for the Mādhyamikas as non-nihilists" (quoted in Tuck, 34).

The debate between de La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky represented the beginnings of a new Western interpretation of Nāgārjuna. It also signified a change in tactics. Instead of dismissing Nāgārjuna as a nihilistic anomaly whose philosophy was contrary to the assumed Indian and European consensus, first Stcherbatsky and then others tried to absorb the Madhyamaka position into the neo-Kantian fold. This tactic of attempting to absorb Buddhism or to make it conform to Western understandings became, in general, the preferred method of dealing with Buddhism from this point forward.

La Vallée Poussin's controversial opinion was presented in his work of 1925, *Nirvāṇa*. Here, he argued that Buddhism was not at its core nihilistic, although this did not include the Madhyamaka which was, according to him, not real Buddhism. Instead La Vallée Poussin argued that *nirvāṇa* was not extinction or annihilation, as was asserted by most European scholars, "but a condition of eternal bliss, a passage of the immortal soul into a transcendent paradise" (Tuck, 36).

In response, Stcherbatsky objected to this presentation of Buddhism, which incorporated Christian beliefs in the soul and paradise, as a false, European projection of essentially different Indian ideas. However, as in most cases,

Stcherbatsky did notice his own Eurocentric bias. Stcherbatsky maintained that that the view that *nirvāṇa* is annihilation was essentially correct, but that this in no way should lead to a conclusion that Buddhism, including the Madhyamaka, is nihilistic. Stcherbatsky, in contrast, became one of the first European scholars to present an interpretation of Nāgārjuna that was neo-Kantian and absolutist. This interpretation, which was revealed in his examination (in 1927) of Candrakīrti's commentary on the *MMK*, clearly shows the Madhyamaka as conforming to the absolutist thrust of European philosophy.

According to Richard Hayes the "Absolute" as a philosophical term first appears in an 1800 text by German idealist philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (Hayes, 329). Schelling was deeply influenced by Kant and he himself went on to influence Fichte and Hegel. This lineage of German idealist and absolutist philosophers, as we have seen, commanded enormous respect throughout later nineteenth century and early twentieth century European thought. Their conception of the Absolute continues to provoke philosophical debate and it is essential for our present purposes to examine what was, and is, meant by this term. Hayes writes that "in the writings of these thinkers, the Absolute is described as the complete and perfect unity underlying the diversity of appearances: it is that which contains and at the same time supersedes all finite realities" (Hayes, 330). In this way absolutist thinking is seen as a development of Kantian thought which stresses that "things in themselves" which Kant calls the *noumena*, as opposed to *phenomena*, cannot be apprehended either empirically or rationally. Unlike Kant, however, the absolutists believe that the *noumena*, which they identify as the Absolute, *can* be known through mystical experience. "Typically it is said that the Absolute cannot be known either through the senses (empirically) or through the intellect (rationally). Knowledge of it therefore requires a special kind of intuition, which is experienced as a sense of complete unity of the knower with the object of knowledge" (Hayes, 330-1).

As previous scholars had identified Indian schools such as Vedānta with absolutism, Stcherbatsky extended this analysis to Nāgārjuna who had been dismissed by European thinkers as a nihilist. Stcherbatsky stressed that *nirvāṇa*

could be identified as annihilation insofar as it could not be apprehended empirically or rationally, but it would be more accurate to characterize it as the inconceivable, undefinable Absolute. Nāgārjuna's emphasis on *śūnyatā* or emptiness, which had in effect alienated most nineteenth century scholars for representing the worst type of nihilism, was interpreted by Stcherbatsky as demonstrating the relativity of the phenomenal world. This emphasis "was meant to deny the reality of empirical phenomena but not to deny the reality of the thing-in-itself – the absolute" (Tuck, 37). In this way, Stcherbatsky asserted, the Madhyamaka could be interpreted as "radical monists."

Mervyn Sprung explains, "[Stcherbatsky] thinks that *śūnyatā* is the relativity of things but that the universe viewed as a whole is the Absolute; Mādhyamika is an assertion of the absolute whole, it is a radical monism" (Sprung, 21). It is the practice of meditation that would eventually allow one to gain the faculty of mystical insight necessary for a full apprehension of this whole. Stcherbatsky chose to interpret Nāgārjuna's identification of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* as an affirmation that the phenomenal world has no existence outside of the absolute reality of *nirvāṇa*. Stcherbatsky does apparently not consider that the reverse might also be implied by this equation. Tuck, in his survey, points out that Stcherbatsky is able to handily translate Nāgārjunian terms into their Kantian equivalents. Stcherbatsky recognized both *nirvāṇa/saṃsāra* and *paramārtha-satya/saṃvṛitti-satya* (ultimate truth/conventional truth) as being equivalent with *noumena/phenomena* (Tuck, 47). Stcherbatsky had, by this approach, made Buddhism and even Nāgārjuna acceptable to Europeans weaned on post-Kantian absolutism in the same way that other Indian schools, and especially Vedānta, had been made acceptable by previous scholars. "Like the Vedānta, Buddhist thought, even the Mādhyamika, could now be read [after Stcherbatsky's interpretation] as a precursor to Western idealist philosophy. To Europe in the early twentieth century, this was an automatic conferral of respectability" (Tuck, 47).

The nihilistic and absolutist interpretations were, however, by no means exclusively the perspectives of early Buddhist scholars. Instead, as Tuck documents, both of these interpretations have recent adherents. T.R.V. Murti is

likely the most notable scholar who openly presents Nāgārjuna as a type of Kantian absolutist. In a 1973 essay Murti, to his credit, explicitly states his interpretational slant: "I have interpreted *śūnyatā* and the doctrine of the Two Truths as a kind of Absolutism, not Nihilism. Nāgārjuna's 'no views about reality' should not be taken as advocating a 'no reality view'" (quoted in Garfield, 305 n.119). In Murti's view, which has obvious similarities to that of Stcherbatsky, Nāgārjuna is seen as an advocate of a transcendent, indescribable ground of all being that is palely and imperfectly reflected in the phenomenal world. In a 1985 work Murti writes, for instance, "The question regarding the *Tathāgata* is in fact about the ultimate ground of both the souls and objects – about the unconditioned in general. The *Tathāgata* as the Perfect Man is the ultimate essence of the universe" (quoted in Tuck, 197 n.66). Obviously here we are very far from the sort of middle way approach that affirms a fundamental lack of foundations.

At the other extreme, Thomas E. Wood represents a recent scholar who openly takes the even more unpopular, nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna. In his 1994 work, Wood bluntly states "Nāgārjuna's negations really amount to the negation of existence, or equivalently, to the assertion that nothing exists" (Wood, 107). Garfield, in refutation of this view, notes that Wood interprets "emptiness as complete non-existence and reads Nāgārjuna as a thoroughgoing nihilist" (Garfield, 302 n.114). Wood asserts that Nāgārjuna teaches that all phenomena are like dreams or mirages, and only when one views phenomena as similarly illusory do all "philosophical problems vanish" (Garfield, 302 n.114).

In his survey, however, Tuck points to an increasingly large body of scholarship that shies away from both of these extreme views. Tuck discusses recent Wittgensteinian interpretations of Nāgārjuna as such a middle way perspective, but unfortunately this particular interpretation falls outside the bounds of this paper. However, Tuck explains that scholars influenced by Wittgenstein have also shown willingness to make comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. The latter, in his apparent refusal to present any sort of philosophical position, will, according to Tuck, "be hard to resist for a young Buddhologist weaned on the Wittgensteinian reading of Nāgārjuna and ready to move on to a 'clearer'

understanding of the text" (Tuck, 99). Tuck refers directly to such an interpretation given by Robert Magliola, and correctly predicts that "more parallels between Nāgārjuna and Derrida are clearly waiting to be written as the enthusiasm for the new 'non-method' gains adherents among asianists" (Tuck, 99). What, as we shall see, is common to these new interpretations is the desire for a middle way between the extremes of absolutism and nihilism. Jay Garfield, if not a Derridean then definitely an advocate of the middle way interpretation, sums up this view: "as Nāgārjuna would point out, absolutism is not the only alternative to nihilism. Mādhyamika is an attempt to forge a middle path between precisely those two extremes" (Garfield, 306 n. 119). Eisegetically, we might say, this quest for middle way interpretations and philosophers that potentially give directions to this way, demonstrates the importance of discovering an approach that in some fashion affirms, rather than denies or despairs, groundlessness. In the next section of this chapter I will attempt to shed light as to why Derrida holds such fascination for precisely this type of scholar.

1.2) *Derrida and Nihilism in the West*

Jacques Derrida, like Nāgārjuna, has been subjected to a variety of interpretations although, obviously, these interpretations have only appeared in the last few decades. The most common criticism of Derrida, as we shall see, is that he is only engaging in a form of nihilistic play that needlessly aims to destroy all traditional perspectives and to replace them with nothing. To some extent this is justified. Derrida to a certain degree employs his deconstructive methodology to challenge all metaphysical assumptions and overturn the binary oppositions that act as the building blocks to such assumptions. Derrida, himself, is conscious of these accusations of nihilism and some would say that he willingly provokes them. However, Derrida's relation to nihilism remains a serious claim and requires examination of not only his own writings and responses to them but also of two precursors of Derrida who influenced him enormously, who were also great challengers of metaphysics, and, in doing so, who were accused of nihilism: Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Both Nietzsche, and later Heidegger, constructed their philosophies, in large part, as a reaction against the elaborate metaphysical speculations of the post-Kantian and post-Hegelian idealist and absolutist philosophies of the nineteenth and, for Heidegger, early twentieth centuries. Nietzsche wrote that even if metaphysical knowledge could be attained of some Absolute it would be useless:

> For one could assert nothing at all of the metaphysical world except that it was a being-other, an inaccessible, incomprehensible being-other; it would be a thing with negative qualities. – Even if the existence of such a world were never so well demonstrated, it is certain that knowledge of it would be the most useless of all knowledge: more useless even than knowledge of the chemical composition of water must be to the sailor in danger of shipwreck. (Nietzsche 1977, 55)

Heidegger declares that Western philosophy from Plato to Hegel is metaphysics. Even Nietzsche's attack against metaphysics has the effect, Heidegger argues, of reinforcing its claims. According to Heidegger metaphysics is concerned with beings and not with Being itself. To the extent that metaphysics *is* concerned with Being itself, it is only Being as the highest being, as the ground, as the first cause, as, namely, God. This reduction of Being to the highest being is what Heidegger calls "onto-theology." Heidegger writes,

> When metaphysics thinks of beings with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such, then it is logic as onto-logic. When metaphysics thinks of beings as a whole, which is with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theo-logic. (quoted in Ruf, 5)

Heidegger considers that Western philosophy's emphasis on the beings of metaphysics and onto-theology, instead of Being itself and its "unconcealment" through language, has led to the problems of reductionistic, "calculative" thinking that are so evident today (Ruf, 11).

By rejecting metaphysics, both Nietzsche and Heidegger realized that they would be accused of nihilism. In fact both thinkers wrote extensively on the implications of either nihilism or "nothingness." It can be argued that both Nietzsche and Heidegger reacted against the metaphysical excesses of post-Kantian and post-Hegelian, Germanic philosophy but also made serious attempts to avoid embracing the opposite extreme of nihilism as absolute negation. Additionally, both thinkers point out the interdependent nature of absolutism and

nihilism, and attempt to map out the precise development of modern nihilism from past absolutism. In this regard Nietzsche and Heidegger can be viewed as philosophers in search of what might be called a "middle way." The particulars of this search by the two philosophers would, in turn, have a huge influence on Derrida's thought.

Kyōto School philosopher, Nishitani Keiji's important study on the development of nihilism in Western thought, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, is an essential source for exploring the interactions with, and the reinterpretations of nihilism investigated by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Nishitani is also important within the context of the present study as a scholar intensely involved in examining parallels between Western thought and Buddhism – specifically issues concerning nihilism, absolutism and the middle way. Francisco Varela explains "Nishitani is exemplary for us because he was not only raised and personally immersed in the Zen tradition of mindfulness/awareness but was also one of Heidegger's students and so is thoroughly familiar with European thought in general and Heidegger's invocation of planetary thinking in particular" (Varela, 241).

In *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, therefore, the relation of Nietzsche and Heidegger to nihilism is examined from this uncommon perspective that Nishitani, nonetheless, partly shares with other scholars of the Kyōto school, as we shall see. In this text Nishitani quotes Nietzsche's reflection on the significance of nihilism in own work and the future of nihilism. In *The Will to Power*, the prophet Nietzsche writes: "The story I have to tell is the history of the next two centuries. I am describing what is coming, what can no longer come in any other way: *the advent of nihilism*" (quoted in Nishitani, 29). In the same passage Nietzsche writes of how all of European culture has been moving "in tortured tension" ... "as if rushing towards a catastrophe" (quoted in Nishitani, 30).

The catastrophe that Nietzsche refers to is nihilism, and specifically that negative, despairing nihilism that arises when traditional, established values, in this case Christian values, are completely devalued and cast away. Nishitani explains, "The ground of received ideals and values has become hollow. As Nietzsche puts it elsewhere, 'God is dead.' The advent of nihilism consists in the gradual

crumbling of these ideals and values, as well as of the entire structure of European life, so that nihility can emerge from the depths" (Nishitani, 32). Nietzsche, however, does not reject nihilism; he does not rush out to construct a new Absolute to replace the dead God. Instead, he affirms nihilism and groundlessness, and he claims to have "lived through" both. Nietzsche describes himself as "the first consummate nihilist in Europe, who, moreover, has already lived nihilism through to the end in himself – who has it behind him, beneath him" (quoted in Nishitani, 30). As Nishitani explains Nietzsche's affirmation of this type of "active nihilism," as opposed to the despairing type of "passive nihilism" that European culture was (is) engulfed in, is deeply linked to Nietzsche's affirmations of eternal recurrence and the will to power. As we shall see in a later chapter, Nishitani criticizes Nietzsche precisely for his need to grasp onto even these ephemeral foundations. However, we can see in Nietzsche the beginnings in Western thought of the need to affirm groundlessness. Nishitani argues that this line of thinking has only become broadened and deepened with Heidegger.

Nishitani explains, "Heidegger gives us nothing less than an ontology within which nihilism becomes a philosophy. By disclosing the nothing at the ground of all beings and summoning it forth, nihilism becomes the basis of a new metaphysics" (Nishitani, 157). In reflecting on the nothing that is the groundless ground of all being, Heidegger writes, "If it were not for the primordial revelation of nothing there would be no self-being and no freedom" (quoted in Nishitani, 164). Nishitani interprets this as meaning that our very understanding of being is opened up and profoundly deepened by this meditation on nothingness and nihilism: "Therefore the finitude of human being and the understanding of Being are bound together within the revelation of nothing" (Nishitani, 168).

It is unfortunate that the implications and details of Nietzsche and Heidegger's philosophies, as well as Nishitani's original analysis of them, cannot be studied with greater depth in this paper. We will find, however, that discussion of all three of these thinkers will appear over and over again throughout the examination of the comparisons and their applications. For the present purposes it will be enough to say that both Nietzsche and Heidegger represent two of the first

thinkers in the modern West to seriously consider the implications of the devaluation of traditional Absolutes, the onset of nihilism that quickly arises from this devaluation, and the need for some sort of an affirmation of groundlessness. In all of these the two have been, and continue to be, tremendously influential. Derrida is very quick to acknowledge his debt to the two, although not without offering his own critical evaluation of their work.

Another author, whose work should be briefly touched upon as a direct influence on Derrida, is linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's most influential work, really a compilation of study notes taken and assembled from his lectures by his best students, is the *Course in General Linguistics*. This book had the effect of transforming the view of linguistics, and cultural systems in general, for generations of continental scholars associated with structuralism, semiotics and post-structuralism. Among those influenced by his work is Claude Levi-Strauss in the field of structural anthropology, Roland Barthes in semiotics, and of course Derrida and deconstruction.

Saussure's basic teaching is that language should be studied synchronically rather than diachronically. That is, language should be looked at as an interconnected system or network that exists and reveals itself in the present, instead of examining how language evolves over time, which was the traditional methodology for the study of linguistics. Saussure argues that the linguist who takes the diachronic approach "no longer observes language but rather a series of events that modify it" (Saussure, 90).

In his *Course*, Saussure likens language to a chess game. Saussure observes, "In a game of chess any particular position has the unique characteristic of being freed from all antecedent positions; the route used in arriving there makes absolutely no difference" (Saussure, 89). He notes that an observer of a particular chess game, who arrives halfway through the game, has no less understanding of the dynamics of the game than a second observer who had watched the game from the start. It does not matter in chess what happened three or two moves previously. It is what is happening in the present on the chessboard as a whole that is

absolutely crucial. In other words, the chess game must be understood synchronically and not diachronically.

Saussure further explains that just as every chess piece in any moment of a chess game is bound up in a complex interrelationship with every other piece, so is each linguistic element interrelated to every other element. "The respective value of the pieces depends on their position on the chessboard just as each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms" (Saussure, 88). And, as in chess, linguistic elements are given value not by their particular symbol but by their relation to all other elements. In other words, within a chess game a coin or a button or any other object, for example, can easily replace a knight as long as its value as a knight is recognized. Just so in language any given word is not identified solely by its particular signifier but by its value within the entire semiological system. The meanings of words are in constant flux but they are at all times identified by context.

Saussure views language as a system of signs, which in turn are composed of signifiers, the actual sounds of each word, and signifieds, the ideas behind the sounds. However, Saussure considered that both signifiers and signifieds are interdependently related and, most importantly, that both emerge out of the system of *differences* that defines language. "Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (Saussure, 120). According to Saussure, therefore, "the idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it" (Saussure, 120).

This idea of language, or semiological systems in general, as a complex ever-shifting system of differences profoundly influenced Derrida. As we shall see, Derrida's key term *différance* has been derived in part, though certainly not entirely, from Saussure's use of the word *difference.* In Saussure's work we can see the beginnings of a contextual or systematic approach to language that, as we have seen, allowed for this type of contextual perspective to be applied in a wide

variety of different fields. In the comparisons that follow, the idea of language as a system of differences "without positive terms," which Derrida later applies to all discursive systems in general, will be viewed as a key point of comparison with Nāgārjuna's apparent view of all things as being empty of own-being.

Derrida's own philosophy will be introduced gradually throughout this paper and largely in the light of its comparison with Nāgārjuna's thought. However, there are certain facets of Derrida's thought that should be briefly discussed in order to better understand the subtleties of these comparisons.

In his introduction to Derrida's *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass attempts to clarify deconstruction by examining its relation with the wider Western philosophical tradition. He writes, "Philosophy is founded on the principle of the *archia*, on regulation by *true*, *original* principles; the deconstruction of philosophy reveals the differential excess which makes the *archia* possible. This excess is often posed as an *aporia*, the Greek word for a seemingly insoluble logical difficulty" (Derrida 1978, xvii). One way, therefore, to approach Derrida's work is to look at the related concepts of *aporia* and excess.

Aporia is a Greek term that refers to a logical or conceptual difficulty that somehow evades solution, and it is a term that Derrida often uses to describe his own work. An *aporia* prevents a philosophical discussion from ever ending. It is an openness that defies closure. Many of Plato's early Socratic dialogues were examples of *aporia* in action: conclusions were not reached and things were not neatly tied up. However, in Western philosophy, from at least Aristotle onward, the *aporia* has been extremely unpopular. The emphasis has been on smoothing out all contradictions, arriving at necessary and universal principles, and reaching firm, well-defended conclusions. Derrida can be seen as a reaction to this type of philosophy – a type of philosophy that Derrida claims is centred on the "metaphysics of presence."

Derrida argues throughout his work that all of Western philosophy, which includes all of Western history, in general, has been dominated by the "determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word" (Derrida 1978, 279). Accordingly, in empirical philosophy the object that is present to sight is

central. In rationalism presence is manifested as the substance, essence or existence of a thing. In temporal terms, the "present," the moment, the now is centrally important. The spoken word is privileged over the written word because it contains more presence. In all aspects of philosophy we observe this centrality and domination of presence – even in everyday language. Derrida writes, "Now 'everyday language' is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it ... presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics" (quoted in Ruf, 22).

Throughout the history of Western philosophy central principles have dominated that represent foundational structures and are characterized by full presence – they are complete and whole in themselves without contradiction and over-flowing excess. They are entirely void of *aporia.* "It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – *eidos*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, Man, and so forth" (Derrida 1978, 280).

Derrida sees himself, therefore, as continuing in the anti-metaphysical tradition of Nietzsche and Heidegger but he is very conscious of the fact that any criticism of metaphysics is, by the very nature of language also metaphysical. He does not merely want to substitute one central idea for another, nor does he want to simply overturn the dichotomies that metaphysics is dependent on – for example to replace absence for presence, becoming for being, woman for man, object for subject and so on. To do this would only establish yet another metaphysical ground. Neither does he set out to destroy metaphysical principles. He realizes that all "destructions" of metaphysics end up only creating new principles. Derrida sees Nietzsche and Heiedegger, as well as many other contemporary theorists, as doing precisely this. "This is what allows these destroyers to destroy each other reciprocally – for example, Heidegger regarding Nietzsche ... as the last metaphysician, the last 'Platonist.' One could do the same for Heidegger himself, for Freud, or for a number of others. And today no exercise is more widespread"

(Derrida 1978, 282). Here we see that instead of advocating the destruction of metaphysics, as he is often accused, Derrida advocates its "deconstruction."

This widespread and abused term "deconstruction" can be seen, following the close reading of Derrida by Bass, as a series of strategies aimed not at the ultimately impossible task of overturning all metaphysics, although it often does uphold marginalized or suppressed elements in dominant metaphysics, but as a process of opening up or decentring metaphysics. In other words, Derrida invites the *aporia* back into the philosophical tradition. Derrida writes that instead of overturning traditional metaphysics, to oppose neglected terms like quality over quantity, depth of meaning over surface value, absence over presence and so on, vastly different approaches are required. "To counter this simple alternative, to counter the simple choice of one of the terms or one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an *economy* escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions" (Derrida 1978, 279).

Many of Derrida's new concepts and models will arise in the course of discussing the various comparisons of his work with Nāgārjuna. Here concepts like *play* and most notably *différance*, are presented as devices that Derrida uses as third terms that somehow escape the strict dichotomous functions of metaphysics. Thus play is seen as being "the disruption of presence... Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative presence and absence" (Derrida 1978, 292). In a like manner *différance* is viewed as not being a word, concept, signifier or signified. It refers to the entire system of signification but itself cannot be signified. Derrida uses these concepts to demonstrate that no real central principles can be found in and of themselves. He asserts "the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences" (Derrida 1982, 11).

In this passage we can see not only the influence of Saussure on Derrida, but also a key point of similarity between Derrida and Nāgārjuna that will emerge over and over again in the comparisons that follow. For just as no element of any

discursive system can be isolated apart from any other, all elements of being are inter-linked by virtue of their being empty of inherent, independent existence.

Derrida, like Nāgārjuna, is often branded as a type of negative theologian who introduces terms like *différance* that refuse to be positively defined. But Derrida makes it clear that he is not trying to point to a being beyond representation. He is only noting that all terms are dependent on all others and therefore impossible to isolate outside of their context. Once again *aporia* is in action. The true meaning of any given text, therefore, can never be ultimately and definitively proclaimed. Each reading opens up the text to new associations and interpretations. Instead of single, fixed meanings to words and concepts, Derrida offers *polysemy* – multiple meanings according to context. This refusal to accept closure or a final reckoning also produces its own type of ethics, which is an area that many of Derrida's critics claim he is deficient in.

For much of Western philosophy the Subject remains solitary and supreme. It is the Subject that surveys and interprets His world. Derrida, however, does not accept the subject as an unassailable, self-enclosed metaphysical category. The subject is also enmeshed and unfolding within the play of differences. Indeed we are all in the process of opening to the other that can never be grasped in its entirety – its excess always defines the other. "The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon: for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognition" (Derrida 1978, 95). This continual openness towards the other will be greatly developed in Derrida's later writings, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, to include the ideas of justice and democracy "to come" – as concepts that can never be wholly defined in the present but must always be open to the other, or the "to come." They must be ever more inclusive but never be proclaimed as finished products.

At this stage, it will be enough to note that Derrida's emphasis on the *aporia* and excess that can never be contained or recentred, represent a type of "middle way" that will be highlighted, in different fashions, again and again in the comparisons to follow. Derrida, like Nietzsche and Heidegger, in no way aims to

establish a new Absolute to replace the fallen idols of the West, but nor does he succumb to a nihilistic denial of all values.

CHAPTER TWO: The Comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida

2.1) *Robert Magliola*

Robert Magliola's 1984 text *Derrida on the Mend* is generally acknowledged as the first published attempt at a comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. In his preface (or "Pre/Face" as he calls it) he relates both the conception and crux of this comparison: "One be/wildering day several strands crossed and I found that Derridean deconstruction and Nāgārjunist Buddhism, the former to dismantle the principle of identity, the latter to dismantle an entitative theory of *dharmas*, resorted to the 'same' logical techniques" (Magliola, ix). Magliola argues that in their respective approaches to "dismantlement" both thinkers effectively challenge the "centric" orthodoxies of their times. In doing this both Nāgārjuna and Derrida do not succumb to nihilism but instead stake out the flowing position of the middle way that makes it course between all binary extremes.

Magliola claims that "the juncture of 'our epoch,' and Derrida's own task, is 'meditation,' cautious and concentrated, on what he has called the 'and/or' *between* 'and/or'" (Magliola, 87). Similarly, Magliola notes that Nāgārjuna "tells us the following: 'In the *Katyayanavavada-Sutra* the Lord [Buddha], who had the right insight into both *bhāva* [existing] and *abhāva* [non-existing], rejected both the extreme alternatives of 'is' and 'not is'" (Magliola, 87). Magliola quotes here verse 7 of the twenty-fifth chapter of the *MMK* that both underscores the importance of the middle way to Nāgārjuna's thought and illustrates the continuity of his thought with that of the Buddha.

In his own commentary on this verse, Jay Garfield writes that in the *Katyayanavavada-Sūtra* "the Buddha argues that to assert that things exist inherently is to fall into the extreme of reification, to argue that things do not exist at all is to fall into the extreme of nihilism, and to follow the middle way is neither to assert in an unqualified way that things exist nor in an unqualified way that

things do not exist" (Garfield, 223). Magliola, in turn, argues that just as the Buddha and especially Nāgārjuna wish to take the non-assertive middle way between existence and non-existence, Derrida also sets out to explore the space between and away from both extremes of any dichotomy. Both Nāgārjuna and Derrida are, for Magliola, philosophers of the middle way. This is, in fact, the basis of Magliola's comparison.

In conducting this comparison, Magliola acknowledges that he is running counter to the prejudices of many Western scholars, unfamiliar with Buddhism, who consider Buddhism to be not serious or rigorous enough, or to be just too different, to merit comparative attention. This criticism Magliola easily dismisses as merely the views of the uninformed and ignorant – citing the amazing strength and profundity of the entire range of Eastern thought and the more recent parallels that have been found between various branches of Eastern and Western philosophy. More serious for Magliola, is Derrida's own dismissal of Eastern philosophy as offering "no more than variations of logocentrism" (Magliola, 88).

Logocentrism is, of course, one of Derrida's chief bogeymen and defined by Magliola as "any *identity* at all that one conceives, or even 'feels,' and then 'labels' or perhaps 'behaves towards' as if it were an 'idea'" (Magliola, 89). This, for Derrida therefore, is a very serious charge. Magliola admits that for the most part that Derrida is justified in pronouncing most Eastern schools of thought as logocentric when one begins to realize the breadth and depth of what Derrida considers as logocentric. Derrida includes in this

> every experience interpreted as holistic, every 'naming' whatsoever, every formulation which coincides space and time, every notion of entitative causality – all of these modulations and more are logocentric. In terms of philosophico-religious systems, every notion of an 'absolute' as Origin, as End, as Centre, as Circumference; or even any paradoxical variation of these, such as God as Centre and Circumference, the absolute as presence and absence, and so on; in short, every 'sense' of an absolute as the 'frame' which contains or accounts for 'everything else', be the latter taken as real, illusory, or whatever, is for Derrida logocentric. (Magliola, 89-90)

If this is taken to characterize what is meant by logocentrism then by any reckoning it is right to judge most Eastern thought as being logocentric. However

the same judgement could be justly applied to most Western thought as well. Indeed it would seem that all systems or schools of thought that employ any metaphysical or ontological notions at all could be challenged by this critique. Magliola, acknowledging this, claims that Nāgārjuna does somehow escape from the category of the logocentric. More than that, Magliola claims that Nāgārjuna "goes 'beyond Derrida' in that [he] frequents the 'unheard-of thought,' and also, 'with one and the same stroke,' allows the reinstatement of the logocentric too" (Magliola, 87). What Magliola means by this "beyond Derrida" and the "unheard-of thought" will come out during the course of his comparison of the two thinkers. This will also be a point of contention between Magliola and those, like Harold Coward and others, who have offered criticism of his work.

We must first, however, examine the fine points of Magliola's comparison where he hopes to show that "Nāgārjuna takes as his specific task the deconstruction of the principle of identity; and that to accomplish this, he employs the same logical strategy, and often the very same arguments as Derrida" (Magliola, 88). To do this Magliola will demonstrate that the basis of his comparison is the acknowledgement that both thinkers are philosophers of the middle way and it is the task of "our epoch" to plot this way. Both philosophers have attempted to point out the course.

> Like Derrida, [Nāgārjuna] recognizes that the concept of eternality (and infinitism) is a consequence of logocentrism, of the 'It is,' in other words; that nihilism (including Voidism), the 'It is not,' is a dialectical variation of logocentrism; and that both alternatives, and any metaphysical 'compromises' mediating them, must be ousted in favour of a 'beyond knowing.' (Magliola, 88)

Magliola commences his comparison by stating point blank that *śūnyatā* and *différance* are equivalent terms. "I shall argue that Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* 'devoidness' is Derrida's *différance*, and is the absolute negation which absolutely deconstitutes but which constitutes directional trace" (Magliola, 89). Steve Odin disentangles this equivalence in the following way:

> According to Magliola, the *différance* of Derrida, like the *śūnyatā* of Buddhism, represents a critical deconstruction of the principle of 'self-identity', i.e. what in Buddhist discourse takes the form of deconstituting all substantialist modes of 'own-being' or 'self-existence' (*svabhāva*). Through deconstructive analysis all

> metaphysical centres understood as a mode of absolute self-identity, are disseminated into a network of differential relationships in which there are no positive entities. (Odin, 4)

While the methodological functions of the two "deconstructive" analyses bear certain similarities – and this will be demonstrated in some depth shortly, it is obvious that the targets for the two are vastly different. For Derrida, the entire Western philosophical tradition will be open for deconstruction. For Nāgārjuna, however, the principal targets of his criticism are rival schools of Buddhism.

Magliola distinguishes the Buddhism of Nāgārjuna from other forms of Buddhism, most notably the "Abhidharmic schools" – which are the main focus of Nāgārjuna's attacks, and which Magliola considers logocentric. He labels these logocentric schools as "centric Buddhism" as they insist on maintaining certain metaphysical centres or identities, such as the *dharmas*, while "differential Buddhists" who follow Nāgārjuna and his successors including certain schools of Zen, intentionally set out to subvert or deconstruct these identities. From this viewpoint the Abhidharmic thinkers, while consistently adhering to the Buddha's teaching on the lack of identity of the self (*anātman*), fall into a "centric" stance by treating the five *skandhas* or components of the apparent self as real entities. This is, of course, for the "differential" Buddhists a dangerous regression back into the pitfalls of "identity-theory."

Nāgārjuna's own thought, however, stems from the Prajñāpāramita tradition which takes a far more "differential" approach. This tradition "discarded theories of origination and cessation of elements, and holding to the doctrine of 'non-production' of elements, undertook a more radical apprehension of the stream of becoming" (Magliola, 91-92). It is in the Prajñāpāramita tradition where the concept of *śūnyatā* rises to prominence, is taken up by Nāgārjuna, and the "differential" stream of Buddhism traces its course. It is this "differential" stream that most concerns Magliola. Magliola notes that over the centuries Nāgārjuna's teaching of *śūnyatā* becomes "absolutized" into something very much akin to Hindu absolutes like *nirguṇa Brahman* which is completely "centric." One Buddhist school which is highly "centric" for Magliola is the Yogācāra "which is idealist and, most would agree, patently logocentric" (Magliola, 92).

It is these inappropriate Buddhist interpretations of Nāgārjuna's thought and *śunyatā* in particular which have, in Magliola's view, only complicated the work of Western interpreters. Magliola points to the famous debate between Stcherbatsky and de la Vallée Poussin on the nature of *śūnyatā*: "whether indeed it was the negativism Poussin felt it to be or the mystical absolutism Stcherbatsky claimed to see in it" (Magliola, 93). Magliola himself, claims to "identify" with a "body of Nāgārjunian scholarship which is very substantial (perhaps dominant) and which is most current" (Magliola, 93). This scholarship emphasizes the middle way approach of Nāgārjuna and includes such respected scholars as Frederick Streng and Mervyn Sprung.

Streng contrasts the absolutism of Hindu schools and the "negative dialectic" of Nāgārjuna in the following way: "unlike the '*Neti, Neti*' (not [this], not [that]) expression in the *Upaniṣads* there is *no inexpressible essential substratum which the negations attempt to describe.* For Nāgārjuna, in place of the Brahman-Atman is *anātman* (no individual identity)" (quoted in Magliola 93-94). In this way Nāgārjuna stays well clear of absolutism for his purpose "is not to describe *via negativa* an absolute which cannot be expressed, but to deny the illusion that such a self-existent reality exists" (quoted in Magliola, 94). This is, of course, also Magliola's own view of Nāgārjuna's thought as the middle way and precisely why he identifies it with Derrida's "the 'and/or' between 'and/or'".

In another sense Magliola understands Nāgārjuna's middle way, like the middle way of Derrida, to represent not so much a theory or a doctrine but instead a practice. In this sense Mervyn Sprung precedes him: "It follows that the middle way is not a means to some final truth; it is not a path leading to knowledge. Whatever it is, it is the end of socratizing, of theory, and of [logocentric] knowing. It is the practice of wisdom, not a means to it" (quoted in Magliola, 94). The middle way, characterized thus far, therefore, can be seen as a practice or a route that escapes all principles of identity and centre, which arises in continual flux and becoming, and does not seek or hope for a final, eternal truth or *telos*. Indeed, paradoxically perhaps, the only goal of the middle way is to prevent being ensnared by a goal.

Magliola writes that this aim of avoiding all centring is precisely Nāgārjuna's view of the Buddha's teaching. "As Nāgārjuna sees it, the Buddha is called *Tathāgata*, 'he who comes/goes thus,' because he is forever coming and going. The Buddha, in other words, is not one who is centred, i.e. he is not one who is coming and going at the same time, nor one who has stopped coming and going" (Magliola,104). Magliola explains that it is not the Buddhist way to seek to attain some illusory centre or focus but willingly and blissfully give up hope of ever finding one. "To put it another way," he writes, "the authentic experience of *śunyatā* runs a sort of Maoist 'continuing revolution' against focus!" (Magliola,104).

The technique Nāgārjuna uses to wage his "continuing revolution" is what Magliola refers to as a "negative dialectic." This technique attempts to trap all opponents on the horns of a dilemma. Dilemma, in this sense, means "an argument which shows the opponent is limited by his premises to two conclusions, each fatal to his own case" (Magliola, 104). This "negative dialectic" is therefore not *reductio ad absurdum* in the strictest application because it does not aim to show the absurdity of the opponent's view in order to promote exactly the opposite view. Instead it aims to make all views impossible. Magliola points out that Derrida also speaks against *reductio ad absurdum* in this sense in favour of the dilemma, which makes any outcome undecidable. "Derrida and Nāgārjuna, in other words, use dilemma in precisely the same way" (Magliola, 104).

Magliola notes that Nāgārjuna often expands his use of the dilemma within the four-fold tetralemma. Using the tetralemma he shows the impossibility of any conclusion by negating all four outcomes, namely "(1) X is Y, (2) X is not-Y, (3) X is both Y and not-Y, and (4) X is neither Y nor not-Y" (Magliola, 105). Magliola provides chapter 27, verse 13 of the *MMK* as an example of this in action: "So, the views 'I existed,' 'I didn't exist,' both or neither, in the past are untenable" (Garfield, 81). Nāgārjuna uses this strategy "to show that all logocentric formulae and dialectical variants thereof, contradict themselves" (Magliola 105). In the same fashion, in Derrida's attack on "philosophy of

presence" he exposes the self-contradictions or "cracks" in the signifier-signified dyads of logocentric thought.

Magliola points to a sequence of four "moves" that Nāgārjuna makes in his employ of the tetralemma to undercut the arguments of his opponents. For Magliola these four have clear parallels with the "Derridean" methodology. The opponent is first shown to be trapped in self-contradiction – that something both "is" and "is not" for example. Secondly an alternative conclusion is introduced – that both possibilities are "empty" (or "devoid" in Magliola's terminology). Next this conclusion is itself placed, in Derrida's phrase, *sous rature* or "under erasure," meaning that the new conclusion itself is only to be accepted as provisional and possessing no inherent self-identity – "emptiness" is itself declared always to be "empty." Finally the provisional and open character of this new "conclusion" allows one to view it as being "in play" with all other elements as it is now defined both by its interdependence and difference. There is "discernment of the *lueur* given off by *différance*, from between the marks of the erasure" (Magliola, 106). A crucial difference, however, is that "in Nāgārjuna the *différance* is recognized and celebrated as *śūnyatā*, and frequented with certainty" (Magliola, 106).

Magliola uses Nāgārjuna's critique of the "Abhidharmic" view of causality as an example of this "negative dialectic" in play. In Magliola's view Nāgārjuna's chief concern with Abhidharma theory is that it viewed the *dharmas* as possessing self-identity and they were, in turn, governed by an independent principle of causality. Nāgārjuna argues, of course, that both the *dharmas* and causality itself are empty. Streng explains:

> Nāgārjuna accepted the notion that existence was a composite of interdependent relations, but extended the dynamics of the dependent co-origination notion to the causal process itself. For him, 'radical becoming' did not allow for a self-existent causal principle – as might be inferred from the earlier [i.e. Abhidharma] explanation. (quoted in Magliola, 107)

Chapter 1, verse 6 of the *MMK* illustrates Nāgārjuna's placing any independent principle of causality on the horns of a dilemma between existence and non-existence. For both existent and non-existent things cannot be said to have conditions or causes: "For neither an existent nor a non-existent thing is a

condition appropriate. If a thing is non-existent, how could it have a condition? If a thing is already existent, what would a condition do?" (Garfield, 4). Magliola sees in this verse the use of the Derridean tactic of *dédoublement* which aims to "split" the positions the adversary puts forward:

> The employ of *dédoublement* to entrap adversaries in dilemma, and then the dialectical playing out of whatever first lemma has been shown to be self-contradictory, until the whole tetralemma which has been 'set in motion' exhausts itself, together forms a logical sequence that Nāgārjuna uses throughout the twenty-seven chapters [of the *MMK*]. (Magliola, 108)

Indeed Nāgārjuna uses the same tactic throughout his treatise to challenge not only entrenched notions of causality, but from there to confront ideas of motion, the elements, essence, the self, time and so on.

When Nāgārjuna declares that emptiness itself is "provisional" (*MMK* 24, 18), Magliola sees this as being placed "*sous rature*" and sees further parallels with Derrida's methodology. He advises us to "notice that even the name and concept of *śūnyatā* are 'provisional,' i.e. 'crossed out.' *Śūnyatā*, like Derridean *différance*, should not be hypostatized and cannot be framed by ratiocination" (Magliola, 116). In the same breath he advises us further to equate the middle paths of the two thinkers. "Remark as well that *śūnyatā* is the 'middle path.' Clearly, Nāgārjuna means *middle* in the sense of the Derridean *between*, tracking its 'and/or' (absolute constitution and absolute negation) *between* the conventional 'and/or' proposed by entitative theory" (Magliola, 116).

Magliola makes it clear however that he does not entirely equate the two diverse philosophers, although he does make the bold claim that "without Derrida it is difficult for a 'moderner' to understand Nāgārjuna!" (Magliola, 93). That being said, Magliola does not see any problem for a "moderner" to conclude that Nāgārjuna has actually "gone beyond" Derrida, for that is the exact conclusion that he makes. He locates two distinctions between the "differential" stances of the two thinkers. Firstly he insists, "While the Derridean alternately celebrates and anguishes, hopes and waxes nostalgic, the Nagarjunist is aware and serene, and has the security which comes with liberation" (Magliola, 126). Secondly "while the Derridean performs the logocentric and differential self-consciously and piecemeal,

the Nagarjunist performs them by means of a grace which is spontaneous but 'at will', a kind of off/self that moves freely between the objectivism of ego and pure devoidness" (Magliola, 126). In other words because of his or her religious practice including various ascetic acts, meditation, compassion for others, and hope for final liberation, the "Nagarjunist" lives with a confidence and fluidity that the "Derridean" does not possess. The former, a "differential mystic" is able "to shift to and fro between the logocentric and differential, according to what the situation requires" (Magliola, 126). This allows for a deep happiness that the Derrideans fall short of in their deconstructive "play". This last point will provide the basis of a criticism of Magliola's comparison by later comparators. David Loy is perhaps the next well known of these comparators and his work will be turned to presently.

2.2) *David Loy*

David Loy's comparison can be initially found in a small section of a chapter in his 1988 book *Nondualism*. In the introduction to this text Loy makes clear his motives for undertaking a study of Asian forms of nondualistic philosophy. He emphasizes that he does not intend only to enhance "scholarly understanding" of the subject but that he hopes "that its critique of subject-object dualism helps to challenge the dualistic categories that have largely determined the development of Western civilization since Aristotle" (Loy 1988, 13). Loy argues that it is this metaphysical position of dualism that has directly led to the increasing ecological and social problems of our time. However, "despite the increasing suspicions about the merits of technological society and the dualistic mode of experiencing it that undergirds it, there is no agreement about what the root of the problem is and therefore what alternative there might be" (Loy 1988, 13). Loy clearly has concluded what the root of the problem is and he *does* point to an alternative to "the nihilism of present Western culture" (Loy 1988, 14) – Asian nondualist philosophies.

This quest for a way to escape the destructive nihilism of our culture is something that has been encountered throughout this paper, and it is a theme that

has reappeared in Western philosophy at least since Nietzsche. Like other thinkers presented here, Loy does not want to "save" us from our collective nihilism by replacing it with a new metaphysical framework that would allow grounding in a new Absolute. Instead he is interested in nondualist perspectives, as we will see, because he sees in them an opportunity to find, once again, a middle way between nihilism and absolutism. One senses in Loy an urgency and critical tone in his writing that is not as obvious in Magliola's work. It is in this tone that Loy conducts his comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida in his section entitled "The Clôture of Deconstruction" and in a 1992 essay included in *Derrida and Deconstruction* entitled "The Deconstruction of Buddhism." The former work provides the basis of his comparison while the latter supplements this while raising other points that will be taken up in the last chapter of this paper.

Loy commences his comparison by bluntly stating, and in agreement with Magliola although for different reasons, that Derrida does not go far enough in his deconstruction. Loy writes that from the nondualist perspective that he is presenting, "the problem with Derrida's radical critique of Western philosophy is that it is not radical enough" (Loy 1988, 249). Derrida's deconstruction does not deconstruct itself and therefore it does not "attain that *clôture* which ... is the opening to something else." Derrida instead "remains in the half-way house of proliferating 'pure textuality,' whereas deconstruction could lead to transformed mode of experiencing the world" (Loy 1988, 249).

Loy recognizes that Derrida is, in fact, very conscious of *not* reaching any type of closure and intentionally promotes polysemy of meaning and "the dissemination of endless supplementation" (Loy 1988, 249). However Loy argues that Derrida, while successfully deconstructing notions of self-identity and self-presence, does not acknowledge the interdependence of the two sides of the dualities that he introduces. Thus his deconstruction remains incomplete. "Expressed in his categories, Derrida, although aware that each term of a duality is the *différance* of the other, does not fully realize how deconstructing one term (transcendental signified, self-presence, reference, etc.) must also transform the other (*différance*, temporization, supplementation, etc.)" (Loy 1988, 249).

Derrida's "single-deconstruction" falls short, therefore, of the "double-deconstruction" of nondualists, like Nāgārjuna, who are able to negate both sides of any dyad. Derrida escapes any conceptual or representational closure and signifiers are able to freely drift in meaning, but he continues to be ensnared in language and thus does not find the closure that would really open up to "something else." "For the nondualist, this can only be the illusion of liberation, while remaining trapped in a textual 'bad infinity' that tends to become increasingly ludic" (Loy 1988, 249). In this endless playfulness which takes place solely within language, Loy sees a type of nihilism but at the same time, and more ironically, he sees it as being yet another example of logocentrism. "Derrida's approach is still logocentric, for what needs to be deconstructed is not just language but the world we live in and the way we live in it, trapped within a cage of our own making" (Loy 1992, 227-8). To put it slightly more bluntly, any liberation that Derrida offers "is overly preoccupied with language because it seeks liberation through and in language – in other words, that it is logocentric" (Loy 1992, 239).

Nāgārjuna, however, like other nondualists, does engage in "double-deconstruction" and thus escapes the "bad infinity" of language to "an experience beyond language – or more precisely, to a nondual way of experiencing language and thought" (Loy 1988, 250). In this way, we might add, Nāgārjuna also is able to point to a middle way between the nihilism of endless deconstruction solely within language and the logocentric absolutism involved in reifying linguistic elements. Loy sees Nāgārjuna's project as being many sided. On the one hand Nāgārjuna sets out to refute the primary philosophical arguments of his time. Loy points out that the purpose of Classical Indian philosophy was to discover that which exists as self-existent, free of dependence from any other agent. In this sense it was a quest for the Real. Loy asserts that Nāgārjuna's perspective of negation follows directly from this quest for independent being. "So Nāgārjuna's task was quite simple: to take all proposed candidates for Reality and demonstrate their relativity (*śūnyatā*), leaving nothing – not even *śūnyatā*, since that term too is relative to the candidates" (Loy 1988, 251). This is essentially the structure of the *MMK*.

On the other hand, Loy maintains that the "real target" of Nāgārjuna's criticism "is that automatized, sedimented metaphysics disguised as the world we live in" (Loy 1992, 240). Loy claims that our "common sense" view of the world and the language we use to support this view is precisely the source of our problems stemming from dualism. For "unarticulated and delusive ontological commitments underlie even the most everyday uses of language" (Loy 1988, 250). Loy explains this function of everyday language as its own type of metaphysics in further depth in his 1992 paper:

> The problem is not merely that language acts as a filter, obscuring the nature of things. Rather, names are used to objectify perceptions into the 'self-existing' things we perceive as books, tables, trees, you and me. In other words, the 'objective' world of material things, which interact causally 'in' space and time, is metaphysical through-and-through. (Loy 1992, 249)

Unlike Magliola who focused almost exclusively on Nāgārjuna's criticism of the Abhidharma, Loy notes that the philosopher focused his "negative dialectics" not exclusively on "the supposedly self-sufficient atomic elements of the Abhidharma analysis." But more significantly, Nāgārjuna set his sights on the "repressed, unconscious, metaphysics of 'common sense'" which sees the world as "a collection of existing things (including us) that originate and eventually disappear" (Loy 1992, 234).

Derrida's deconstruction, for Loy, is very effective at challenging metaphysical concepts within philosophy but he is less effective at deconstructing the implicit metaphysics of "common sense." However, like Magliola, Loy locates several similarities between the deconstructive tactics of Derrida and Nāgārjuna. Loy, also like Magliola, sees the obvious similarities between *śūnyatā* and *différance*. Loy also points out that Nāgārjuna's use of *śūnyatā* is also *sous rature* or "under erasure" – meaning that it is used provisionally and relatively and it is not to be thought of as a category in and of itself. Both are "deployed for tactical reasons but denied any semantic or conceptual stability" (Loy 1992, 234). Loy quotes *MMK* 13, 8 as an example of Nāgārjuna's warning to use *śūnyatā* under erasure: "The victorious ones have said that emptiness is the relinquishing of all

views, for whomever emptiness is a view, that one will accomplish nothing" (Garfield, 36).

Loy explains that this is where one can find the "deepest resonance" between the two thinkers. As with Nāgārjuna, Derrida's "deconstruction also proceeds by demonstrating the inescapable *différance* infecting all Western metaphysical candidates for a transcendental signified" (Loy 1988, 251). For both Derrida and Nāgārjuna "*śūnyatā/différance* is a 'non-site' or 'non-philosophical site' from which to question philosophy itself" (Loy 1992, 234). This 'non-site' is contrasted by Loy to the transcendent, overseeing position of metaphysics: "The fundamental presupposition of metaphysics – that we can mirror the whole terrain from some Archimedean point of pure, self-contained thought – is the illusion that they subvert, and their weapons are *śūnyatā/différance*" (Loy 1988, 251).

Again, however, Loy reminds us that Derrida's view of difference does not go far enough. Derrida, himself, sees the "play of differences" as being somewhat fundamental: "The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals, which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself .... There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces" (quoted in Loy 1988, 252). Derrida, therefore, following Saussurean linguistics, sees every given linguistic system as deriving meaning from a vast, complex network of differences as opposed to simple correspondence between signifier and signified. This being the case meaning becomes elusive and shifting, self-presence is never reached within a text and "the continual circulation of signifiers signifies that meaning has no firm foundation or epistemological ground" (Loy 1992, 235). From this perspective, as it is quite impossible to separate signifiers from signified, the play of signifiers takes over the role of the signified. Derrida explains, "The ontological consequences for such a view are immense. The rigid metaphysical distinction between empirical signifier and ideal signified becomes obliterated in a general circulation of signs, i.e. in the play of signifiers" (quoted in Loy 1988, 257). Derrida sees in this a cause for celebration as all elements become equal and all is welcome to join in "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world

of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" (quoted in Loy 1992, 240).

Loy, however, does not see this as being a cause for celebration. "To rejoice in being caught in a language that has lost its ability to represent any truth brings to mind Bernard Shaw's comment on the pleasures of an endless holiday: 'a good working definition of hell'" (Loy 1988, 257). In contrast with the liberation promised by Buddhism, Derrida's "liberation" within language falls far short. "This might 'liberate' the proliferations of dissemination, but such "free play" must be called nihilistic if it is motivated by having nothing else to do" (Loy 1988, 259). Against this supposed nihilism, Loy contrasts the middle way of Nāgārjuna, which not only "deconstructs" identity, as does Derrida, but "deconstructs" difference as well.

Loy argues that Nāgārjuna, as well as Buddhist philosophy in general, is, like Derrida, also greatly concerned with negating any form of "transcendental-signified." Nāgārjuna's own aim, Loy concludes, is to refute all philosophical views and to prevent any metaphysical position from arising. Loy quotes Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyavartani* (verse 29) as an example of Nāgārjuna's chafing against positions: "If I were to advance any thesis whatsoever, that in itself would be a fault; but I advance no thesis and so cannot be faulted" (quoted in Loy 1992, 232). Loy insists that even *nirvāṇa*, which as we have seen has often been interpreted as some type of metaphysical Absolute or ontological state by various interpreters, cannot be seen as any form of "transcendental-signified." For as chapter 25, verse 20 of the *MMK* ("Whatever is the limit of *nirvāṇa*, that is the limit of cyclic existence. There is not even the slightest difference between them, or even the subtlest thing" (Garfield, 75)) makes clear *nirvāṇa* is not transcendent. Nor is it signified: "No *Dharma* was taught by the Buddha at any time, in any place, to any person" (*MMK* 25, 24: Garfield, 76).

So far it would seem that Derrida would give his blessing to Nāgārjuna's enterprise. However, Loy stresses that the blessing might not be extended in reverse. Derrida simply does not go far enough and this is the message that Loy repeats over and over in his comparison. The "double-deconstruction" or "double-

strategy" is used effectively by Nāgārjuna to produce "a theory about the delusiveness of thought" and also to dismiss the same "by turning it back against itself" (Loy 1988, 256). By employing this self-devouring strategy "head swallows tail, and nothing remains – no *nirvāṇa*, no Buddha, no teaching at all" (Loy 1988, 256). In contrast Derrida's deconstruction remains self-consciously mired in language. In Loy's view Derrida's strategy is also double – the first move being his critique of self-presence, which employs *différance*, and the final move is "dissemination" which allows "the seminal adventure of the trace" (Loy 1988, 256). This according to Loy leads precisely to the nihilistic "bad infinity" that Nāgārjuna avoids just as much as metaphysical Absolutes.

Loy uses causality as an example where Nāgārjuna goes one step further than Derrida. In Derrida's approach causality can be seen as being "the equivalent of textual *différance* in the world of things" (Loy 1992, 247). In other words causality demonstrates the differences between objects. By showing the inherent emptiness of all things and therefore their inter-relatedness Nāgārjuna does the same thing that Derrida does for the elements of text. However, Nāgārjuna takes the next step by demonstrating that "the absence of any self-existing objects refutes causality/*différance*" (Loy 1992, 247). Once again Nāgārjuna makes a deconstruction of both identity and difference and thus escapes the trap of language. It is in this way that the deconstruction of Nāgārjuna is complete and in the same way that the deconstruction of Derrida can be completed.

Loy remarks: "If the larger meaning of deconstruction is that language/reason is deconstructing itself as our place of self-grounding, the full consequences of deconstruction remain to be seen" (Loy 1992, 245). As long as Derrida insists, "there is nothing outside of the text," these "full consequences" will not be seen and deconstruction will remain nihilistic. It will become clear, however, that others have interpreted this most abused and infamous of Derrida's statements in radically different ways. For Harold Coward, Nāgārjuna is certainly logocentric and "there is nothing outside of the text" most especially reveals Derrida as a pathfinder of the "middle way."

2.3) *Harold Coward*

Harold Coward's comparison of Derrida and Nāgārjuna appears in his 1990 book *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* where, in addition to this comparison, Derrida is compared to various other Indian thinkers. Coward's motives for writing this text are revealed in his introduction. He begins with a meditation on language and in particular on the privileging of oral over written language in especially the sacred traditions of the West but extending to Western thought in general. Having heard that Derrida overturns this dichotomy and therefore promotes writing over speech, Coward turned to the work of Derrida to find a balancing viewpoint. What he found, as he relates, was "something much deeper" (Coward, 4). Coward now feels that "Derrida's rereading of the whole oral-written debate" shifts "the analysis to a deeper level in an attempt to find a 'middle way'" (Coward, 4). This "middle way" that Coward sees as Derrida's course between oral and written conversation is, of course, the same middle way which avoids the dialectical extremes of any dichotomy, so essential to metaphysics, including the extreme positions of absolutism and nihilism. It is this middle way approach that Derrida takes that allows Coward to recognize resonances in Derrida's thought with Indian philosophy and especially Nāgārjuna.

Coward acknowledges immediately the comparative efforts of Magliola and Loy that have preceded him. However, Coward's own position, while like Magliola and Loy demonstrates a search for and reverence of the middle way, is highly critical of both. Coward concedes that Magliola is correct in his insistence that both Nāgārjuna and Derrida "take as their specific task the deconstruction of the principles of identity and eternality" (Coward, 138). He also concedes that Magliola is right in his contention that the two thinkers often use the same logical strategies and arguments within their deconstructions. Coward is also willing to accept tentatively the equivalence of *śūnyatā* and *différance* but he remains "doubtful" of Magliola's claim that Nāgārjuna's "beyond knowing" allows for logocentric knowledge but is, at the same time, not logocentric. Coward claims this view that Nāgārjuna is willing to accept logocentric or language-bound knowledge

does not mesh with Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti's own teaching of language being *vikalpa*, "an imaginary or conventional mental conceptualization" (Coward, 126) that has no bearing on the real. For Coward, Magliola is granting Nāgārjuna a more welcoming opinion of language than the sage actually possessed.

Coward's criticism of Loy is similar to his critique of Magliola, in that Coward recognizes that Loy also believes that Derrida does not go far enough and remains in the "halfway house" of the "bad infinity" of "pure textuality" (Coward, 127). Just as Magliola believes that Nāgārjuna "frequents the 'unheard-of-thought,'" Loy believes that Nāgārjuna's deconstruction allows "a non-dual way of experiencing language and thought" (Loy 1988, 250). Nevertheless, perhaps because Loy's comparison is more coherent, Coward chooses to direct more attention to refuting Loy's argument that Derrida does not go far enough by not deconstructing language itself, than to Magliola's position. Coward takes objection most highly to Loy's suggestion that Derrida's advocacy of "linguistic free play" is nihilistic (Coward, 127). Coward attempts to show that, on the contrary, Derrida is an advocate of the middle way while Nāgārjuna remains mired in logocentrism. Before turning to the specific points of contention that Coward believes Derrida would have with Nāgārjuna, it should be noted that Coward does see several points of contact between the two. In this he is in agreement with Magliola and Loy.

Like Loy and Magliola, Coward sees in Nāgārjuna's "deconstruction" of the Abhidharma position that there is a plurality of distinct and essential *dharmas* that compose the nature of reality, a deconstructive move that would be favourable to Derrida. Derrida would also agree with Nāgārjuna's negation of the Hindu *ātman* view, and would consider both this view and the Abhidharma position as being extreme views suitable for deconstruction (Coward, 133). Coward also agrees that Derrida's view of language and reality being characterized by a continually shifting, complex interplay of differences is similar to the crucial concepts of change and interdependence that we find in Nāgārjuna and, more significantly, in the Buddha's own teaching of *pratītya-samutpāda*. It will be shown, however, that Coward does find an irreconcilable distinction between these

two concepts of continual change. In general, however, for both Nāgārjuna and Derrida "difference is fundamental" (Coward, 137).

Coward writes, also in agreement with Magliola and Loy, that "both Nāgārjuna and Derrida agree that what is required is a deconstruction of the illusions of permanence, stasis, or presence that ordinary experience and many philosophies have superimposed on language" (Coward, 139). This deconstruction by the two aims at "all theology, philosophy, and ordinary language that objectifies our experiences into false gods and unreal presences. For both it is the erroneous objectifying of language that obstructs our acting in conformity with reality" (Coward, 141). For Coward this relation of language to "reality" provides the fundamental dissimilarity between the two. The pinpointing of this difference will also be the focus of Coward's dispute with the comparative efforts of Loy and Magliola.

Coward emphasizes that the "main point" of his analysis is "the disagreement between Nāgārjuna and Derrida over the nature and limit of language" (Coward, 138). For Derrida language is contextual – an almost incomprehensible network of "traces of traces." This "inherent trace consciousness of language conditions all psychic experience from deep sleep to dreams to ordinary awareness and even to mystical states *and provides the inescapable mode for our experience of reality* [Coward's emphasis]" (Coward, 138). In Derrida's view, in other words, "language is the means for the experience of the real" (Coward, 138). The structure of language is nothing other than the structure of "reality."

Coward explains that when Derrida writes of "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" he is faithfully conforming to his background in the Jewish tradition. For in this tradition "the Torah manifests the all-embracing underlying structure of reality – nothing is outside of its scope. That is why Derrida maintains that there is no external referent, 'There is nothing outside of the Text'" (Coward, 13). Within the tradition of the Torah both the written and the oral are treated with equal respect, and the realm of language and the realm of the "real" are seen as being one. "The rabbinic approach sees the interpretation of Torah as the way to unlock the secrets

of creation" (Coward, 13). From Coward's perspective, therefore, Derrida sees the "limits of language" as being the very limits of everything, and so cannot be said to be trapped in a "bad infinity" of language-play unless this "bad infinity" is the only thing there is.

Nāgārjuna, in contrast according to Coward, views "the inherent nature of language in its subject-object conceptualizing of all experience to be the major obstacle to the experience of the real" (Coward, 138). In the *MMK*, Coward asserts, Nāgārjuna clearly makes the case that language is entirely conventional and therefore cannot apprehend ultimate reality and that the best approach is silence (Coward, 135). In this way, Coward explains, Nāgārjuna is anticipating the use of the term *vikalpa* by the Yogācāra. "Vasubandhu, in his *Treatise on the Three Natures* (*Tri-Svabhava-Nirdeśa*), defines *vikalpa* as a mental form or construction characterized by subject-object duality" (Coward, 136).

This notion of language as *vikalpa* and therefore as being entirely separate from the "real," would be, Coward insists, "attacked by Derrida as being just as unsatisfactory as the extreme logocentric position that identifies speech with the real" (Coward, 136). Just as Derrida takes the middle way between speech and writing instead of favouring one over the other, Coward sees Derrida as taking the middle way between asserting that language (as *Logos*) somehow represents "reality" and the other extreme assertion that reality is entirely absent from language. "With regard to language Derrida could claim for himself the 'middle path' that the Buddhists appear to have missed" (Coward, 136). By privileging silence over speech and ultimate over conventional reality, Nāgārjuna, in Coward's view, takes an extreme position resembling absolutism that would be justly deconstructed by Derrida. "Whereas for Buddhism language is empty of reality, for Derrida there is no experience of reality outside of language" (Coward, 137). "Reality," according to Coward's reading of Derrida, can be experienced through the "tension between the dualities" within language, but from Nāgārjuna's perspective "reality can be experienced only when language is completely negated so that the [conventional] level disappears leaving *paramārtha* or ultimate reality fully revealed" (Coward, 139). This "ultimate" level, for Nāgārjuna, is entirely

empty (in the sense of *śunya*) "of the conceptual constructions of language," while in the Derridean view, "there is no second level" (Coward, 139). That there is a "second level" for Nāgārjuna is a controversial point and it is a point that will be used against Coward's comparison of the two as will be shown later.

Derrida's "rabbinic approach" to language also provides, for Coward, a type of "spiritual realization" (which, however, cannot be named "spiritual" as this already employs the language of metaphysics), "that the dynamic tension in the becoming of language is itself the whole" (Coward, 140). The "whole" in this sense, for Coward, is Derrida's notion of the "sign" which however remains as a play of differences, as incomplete, and as ever becoming and therefore is unlike the "whole" or the "one" of metaphysics. Coward explains, "the direct perception of the dynamic process of the becoming of language (not as a process of static reflection or metaphysical opposition) would be, for Derrida, the realization of the whole" (Coward, 139-140). Coward emphasizes that this should not be taken as "mere abstract theorizing" because "the language we are deconstructing is our own thinking and speaking – our own consciousness" (Coward, 140). As each of us really is the text that is being deconstructed "deconstruction of language is the process of becoming self-aware, of self-realization" (Coward, 140).

In contrast, language for Nāgārjuna is what reinforces subject-object dualities, obstructs us from experiencing the ultimate and prevents self-realization. For genuine realization to happen, Nāgārjuna, like the Buddha, recommends silence. Derrida, Coward notes, also has a conception of silence but it is not at all a negation of language. Coward quotes Derrida in his essay "Cogito and the History of Madness," where he mentions, although in a much different context from that being presently discussed, that "silence plays the irreducible role of that that bears and haunts language, outside and *against* which alone language can emerge" (quoted in Coward, 141). Coward also refers to Derrida's essay "Edward Jabès and the Question of the Book," where Derrida writes of meaning emerging in the lapses and silences "between letters, words, sentences, books" (Derrida 1978, 71). In Coward's reading of this passage it is the God of the Jews, Himself, who questions out of this very silence.

Thus in contrast to Nāgārjuna's meaning of silence which is "the result of the cessation of language, Derrida's silence is the origin, the source of all speaking, and yet a source that locates itself in the quiet between the sounds of God's voice and the spaces between the letters of his writing" (Coward, 142). Whether or not Derrida would agree with this assessment of his views on silence is outside of the scope of this paper. Parenthetically, this paper is not primarily concerned with locating and presenting a "correct" interpretation of either Derrida or Nāgārjuna, but with examining the possible motivations behind these interpretations.

In Coward's interpretation, Derrida's view of silence and the "spiritual realization" that arises from beholding the "becoming of language" vastly sets Derrida apart from Loy's judgement of Derrida's deconstruction as "ending, at best, in a Nietzschean nihilistic free play" (Coward, 157). Instead of promoting a form of nihilism, Derrida is suggesting a path to self-realization that also avoids the extremes of metaphysics and absolutism. It is, in fact, a middle way. "For Derrida language exists infinitely as trace or *différance* and in its questioning from the midst of silence leads us to confirm ourselves in ethical action – not through the debate of thesis and antithesis, but in relation to the other" (Coward, 157-158).

Coward's position that Nāgārjuna strays from the middle way that Derrida manages to follow steadfastly does not stand unchallenged. Magliola responds to Coward's criticism of his own comparison by offering, in his 1997 book *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds*, a critique of Coward. In this work Magliola, more explicitly than in *Derrida on the Mend*, presents both Nāgārjuna and Derrida as traversing a distinctly middle path between the extremes of absolutism and nihilism. It is from this vantage point from which he criticizes Coward. Magliola claims bluntly that Coward is wrong in his conclusions because he misunderstands Derrida and misinterprets Nāgārjuna. According to Magliola, Coward's understanding of "textuality" for Derrida is too narrow. He writes: "When Derrida says there is no *hors-texte*, he means that all human going-on is 'textuality'" (Magliola 1997, 144). This means that the experience of the "real," whether it is traditionally viewed as being outside of language or not, is still "textuality" as it is still a "human going-on." To be fair, however, Coward emphasizes clearly that in

his view Derrida sees language as being "the means for the experience of the real" (Coward, 138). This is, in fact, the whole basis of Coward's exposition of Derrida's "rabbinic approach." Magliola seems to have missed this point.

Magliola, however, may be closer to the mark when he challenges Coward's misinterpretation of Nāgārjuna. Magliola notes that Nāgārjuna's teaching of "the two truths" is often misinterpreted, even within the Mahāyāna tradition, as representing different ontological levels of reality – the phenomenal and the absolute. By employing sources sympathetic to the Yogācāra, as we have seen especially in his presentation of language as being *vikalpa* for Nāgārjuna, Coward makes this mistake of seeing an ontological difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* where only an epistemological difference is implied in the teaching of the two truths. Magliola points out the famous equivalence of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* referred to in the *MMK* 25:20 as demonstrating both the conceptual and ontological emptiness of the two. In this way they may be regarded as identical. Magliola feels that the Yogācāra, as a fundamentally "centric" school of Buddhism, misses this point and tends toward absolutism. This, in turn, is precisely why Coward, citing these sources, misinterprets Nāgārjuna by claiming that he views the realm of language as somehow being less real than the ultimate. For Magliola, Nāgārjuna sees both as being empty and this brings Nāgārjuna's position very close to Derrida's (Magliola 1997, 152).

Coward, however, does remain open to this interpretation of Nāgārjuna as well. Coward points to a 1984 article by David Loy where another interpretation of Nāgārjuna is presented "that brings him much closer to Derrida" (Coward, 145). In this article Loy offers a criticism of the Kantian/Vedāntic interpretation of Nāgārjuna, presented at an early stage by Stcherbatsky and more recently by T.R.V. Murti, which tends to equate *saṃsāra* with the phenomenal and *nirvāṇa* with the noumenal. However, for Loy, this distinction between the "real" and "apparent" worlds is "irremediably metaphysical and inconsistent with the fundamental Mādhyamika tenet that *saṃsāra is nirvāṇa*" (Loy 1984, 442).

The main problem in the Kantian interpretation is the view that *śūnyatā* represents an ultimate truth or is an ontological category in itself. Instead

"emptiness is a soteriological therapy .... In other words, emptiness, the relativity of all things, is itself relative; the ultimate truth, like the conventional, is devoid of independent being" (Loy 1984, 442-443). In a private correspondence to Coward, Loy relates this fundamental interdependence of the so-called "real" and "apparent" worlds to the use and truth-value of language. "If there is no subject-object separation between language and object," he writes, "between signifier and signified, then all phenomena, including words, are *tathata*, 'thusness'" (quoted in Coward, 145).

Coward realizes that this view of language is far more positive than the view that, he seems to recognize, his use of sources, which tend to take the Kantian interpretation of Buddhism and therefore find far more resonances in the Yogācāra than in Nāgārjuna, led him to conclude that Nāgārjuna saw language only as something false to be overcome. In admitting this he observes, "if Loy's analysis is adopted, then both Derrida and Nāgārjuna envisage a spiritual realization in which language continues to function – and in which language is instrumental in bringing about the result" (Coward, 146). This conclusion both brings much closer together the comparisons of Coward and Loy, and anticipates Magliola's criticism. All three, therefore, arrive at positions, influenced by the work of the others, which are quite similar. Both Coward and Magliola finally accept that both Derrida and Nāgārjuna are taking similar middle paths between endless, and ultimately useless, nihilistic romps with language alone, and the absolutism involved in the reification of the "transcendental signifieds" that language points to. Loy retains his criticism of Derrida, but continues to refer to Derrida's work, and if his position is modified by Coward's view of Derrida's "spiritual realization," then the difference between Loy and the others is also minimized.

These three provide the crucial, groundbreaking comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida and have been discussed at length for this reason. Others have followed, and have added or objected to certain elements to these comparisons, but these later comparisons, if thorough, have had to refer to these three "pioneers." All of the comparisons that have followed have also had to acknowledge that the basis of their comparison, if any, is the middle way between nihilism and

absolutism that both figures traverse. This paper will concentrate on one more significant comparison, that of Ian Mabbett, before briefly surveying some other comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida that have arisen in the course of exploring other subjects.

2.4) *Ian Mabbett*

Ian W. Mabbett's 1995 article "Nāgārjuna and Deconstruction" is, unlike the three previous comparisons examined, a very systematic comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. From the outset of his paper Mabbett refers to these previous efforts by Magliola, Loy and Coward and places his own work as a continuation of these efforts. He admits that initially he considered that a comparison of these two widely different thinkers and philosophies "from such different cultural environments must be radically incommensurable, and the plotting of similarities could only be a *jeu d'esprit*" (Mabbett, 203-204). However, after he became more engaged in his research "the more genuinely significant the similarities seemed to be" (Mabbett, 204). In the end, he considers this comparison to be "not just a game" but "allows us to recognize a type of vision that can, perhaps, be shared by widely different cultures" (Mabbett, 204). What this "vision" is, as we will see, although Mabbett unlike his predecessors does not state it explicitly, is that of a middle way.

Mabbett systematically identifies certain points of comparison and demonstrates how Nāgārjuna and Derrida essentially agree with each of these points. It is an approach which for the purposes of the present paper will also allow a brief presentation of Mabbett's own position.

Mabbett's first point of contact is that "*both avoid any claim about a determinate reality*" (Mabbett, 205). He emphasizes that Nāgārjuna's teaching of "emptiness" or "voidness" must not be taken to mean "falsity" or "non-existence" – in other words it must not be taken as a form of nihilism. Instead, Nāgārjuna commits himself "to no doctrine or belief about reality (*dṛṣti*)" (Mabbett, 205). Nāgārjuna is not negating the thesis of his opponent in order to advance his own thesis, but quite explicitly to oppose all such views. "What Madhyamaka teaches is

that concepts, dogmas, and rational constructions of all sorts that presuppose the existence of things fail to capture the ultimate truth" (Mabbett, 206). Mabbett quotes the famous verse from the *MMK* about the incurability of those who take *śūnyatā* as a view in itself, as textual evidence of Nāgārjuna's disdain of all views.

Similarily, Mabbett claims, Derrida and the deconstructionists do not attempt to postulate their own theories when showing the inherent inconsistencies in other theories. Instead it is shown that any proposition is dependent on its context – "an infinite play of differences that cannot be fixed and determined" (Mabbett, 206). Both truth and untruth claims cannot be presented as objective facts but must be seen as "arbitrary constructions" which are meaningless without this context.

Mabbett's next point of similarity that "*both identify their teaching with what is actually the case*" (Mabbett, 206), seems in a certain sense to contradict the last point. However, what Mabbett means by this, and in agreement with previous comparisons, is that instead of pointing to some higher truth or ontological reality outside of the language of their teaching, it is the teaching itself which is "actually the case" – there is no transcendent other that it refers to. Mabbett, as in previous comparisons, holds that Nāgārjuna teaches "that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are coterminous. There is no place or state separate from the world we know, with its chaos, its inconsistencies, its texts waiting to be deconstructed" (Mabbett, 207).

In like manner Mabbett notes that Derrida also agrees that deconstruction cannot be seen as something that is separate from the world itself. Derrida writes: "Deconstruction is neither theory nor philosophy. It is neither a school nor a method. It is not even a discourse, nor an act, nor a practice. It is what happens, what is happening today" (quoted in Mabbett, 207). In this view, argues Mabbett, the "real" is not something that exists prior to our continuing, unfolding construction of our process of knowing. If Mabbett's first point can be taken as being Nāgārjuna's and Derrida's rejection of nihilism, this point must be seen as a rejection of absolutism by the two.

Mabbett's next comparison is that both thinkers insist that things have no independent, intrinsic existence but must only be considered in relation to other

things. We have seen this point being raised again and again in the comparisons. Mabbett, like the others, points to Nāgārjuna's critique of the Abhidharma theory of essential and separate *dharmas*. "For Nāgārjuna," he writes, "nothing is real and solid – not just its position but its very being belongs to not it but something else" (Mabbett, 208). In deconstructionist thought this is also the case. The text and the reader are seen as two interdependent aspects of the "whole," which, however, cannot be defined in either term, or in the terms of anything else, but should be seen as an indeterminate, ever-becoming, contextual relationship. According to Derrida "this is my starting point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation" (quoted in Mabbett, 209).

Mabbett emphasizes that both thinkers "criticize the logic of binary oppositions" (Mabbett, 210). Much has also already been written about this. Mabbett, as in previous comparisons, points to the structure of the *MMK*, where, in general, Nāgārjuna sets out to demonstrate the absurdity of separating and ranking obviously related pairs. "Cause and effect, subject and verb, sensation and object of sense, entity and property, agent and action ... and even *nirvāṇa* and life or becoming are all declared to be void, meaningless, mere empty expressions" (Mabbett, 210). Mabbett explains that this is exactly the same technique that Derrida and others use to overturn and then to make unstable binary oppositions like signified and signifier, man and woman, speech and writing and etc. so that both sides are revealed to be indeterminate.

Mabbett asserts that both Derrida and Nāgārjuna celebrate emptiness. This point is essentially quite similar to that presented by Magliola and the others. It is significant, however, that Mabbett notes that Nāgārjuna's teaching of emptiness does not imply a type of nihilism. He stresses that "Madhyamaka is not idealism, and it is not nihilism either" (Mabbett, 211). Emptiness is both different from existence and non-existence. "It designates the ontological status of a network of interdependent phenomena, rigorously governed by the rules of production but without the supporting framework of any first cause, divine power, or immanent absolute" (Mabbett, 211). Here it becomes clear that Mabbett views Nāgārjuna's teaching as a middle way between nihilism and absolutism.

This is also his understanding of Derrida. Mabbett asserts that deconstruction, with its focus on "absence" and negation, "is not a simple nihilism" (Mabbett, 212) – it does not make the case for the non-existence of things. Rather what the deconstructionists attempt to do is to "point to the impossibility of finding original and ultimate referents for our words; what words succeed in referring to consists of traces, and these traces are traces of traces" (Mabbett, 212). Like Nāgārjuna, Derrida reacts against the traditional and common sense worldview that there is an absolute correspondence between words and the things that they refer to. In fact, upon analysis the "presence" of the thing referred to cannot be definitively found. "There is no presence or *svabhāva*; there is only absence, and the real nature of things we seek to define must remain forever indeterminate" (Mabbett, 212). Thus on the one hand nihilism must be rejected, and on the other hand it remains impossible, even in negative terms, to point to a determinate Absolute.

Mabbett, like Magliola, demonstrates that both philosophers use the same four-cornered logic. Nāgārjuna employs the *catuṣkoṭi* or tetralemma to show "that a given concept can have no fixed or determinate referent in reality" (Mabbett, 213). Mabbett also insists that this is the strategy that Nāgārjuna uses throughout the *MMK*, and Mabbett explains its use in a way that is very similar to Magliola. Mabbett refers to a study of deconstructive logic by Barbara Johnson wherein she argues that the tetralemma is used by the deconstructionists as well: "Instead of a simple 'either/or' structure, deconstruction attempts to elaborate a discourse that says *neither* 'either/or' *nor* 'both/and' nor even 'neither/nor,' while at the same time not abandoning these logics either" (quoted in Mabbett, 214). In his essay, "How to Avoid Speaking," Derrida clearly reveals the logic and significance of the teralemma: "Every time I say: X is neither this nor that, neither the contrary of this nor that, neither the simple neutralization of this nor of that with which it has *nothing in common*, being absolutely heterogeneous to or incommensurable with them, I would start to speak of God" (quoted in Mabbett, 214-215).

Mabbett's next point of contact between the two, that "both dismantle the concept of the self" (Mabbett, 215), stems from both the deconstructive logic of

the tetralemma, and their mutual emphasis on "emptiness." Nāgārjuna's critique of the self is laid out in chapter 18 of the *MMK* where he at once proves the soundness of the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*, and also shows the emptiness of this doctrine as a view in itself. Derrida, following in the wake of post-structualist criticism, has also challenged the traditional Western perspective of the sovereign self or subject. A "decentring" of the subject has occurred. "There is no fixed point of all reference marked by a seat of consciousness, from which the rest of the world can be observed; its place has been taken by a point of convergence, but the lines which converge are always shifting, and the self which they define is always retreating" (Mabbet, 215). Derrida refers to this impossibility of encapsulating the interdependent, ever-becoming nature of the individual when he writes: "'I' always means, at heart, 'I am dead'" (quoted in Mabbett, 216).

Mabbett's last point of comparison is perhaps his most controversial. He asserts that both thinkers recognize two truths – of the conventional and the ultimate. Nāgārjuna's own doctrine of the two truths has been well covered and need not be explained once more. Mabbett stresses that there is a similar "two truths" teaching in Derrida's deconstruction which, Mabbett cautions should not be seen as "*just the same thing*" as Nāgārjuna's teaching (Mabbett, 216). Mabbett claims that the worldly truth of deconstruction involves facts, arguments, research papers, books, followers, opponents, institutions and so on. This, however, is only provisional and is a stepping-stone to the ultimate truth of deconstruction, which is precisely the absence of all of these things in addition to theories, methods, doctrines, etc. Deconstruction has no fixed position and avoids all positions. "It takes in all theories, but does not enter a determinate relationship with any one; it transcends them all, seeing through their indeterminacy" (Mabbett, 217).

Mabbett's comparison will be the last major comparison presented here in depth that focuses primarily on Nāgārjuna and Derrida. There have, however, been several other comparisons made between the two that have emerged within the context of discussing other subjects. These comparisons also show that the basis for a comparison between the two is dependent on a middle way reading of both.

2.5) *Other Indirect Comparisons*

2.51) *David Dilworth*

David A. Dilworth, in a 1987 introduction and postscript to his translation of Kyōto school philosopher, Nishida Kitarō's *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, does not provide a specific comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. Instead Dilworth explains that Nishida, writing from a tradition that stems back to Nāgārjuna, employs a form of paradoxical logic that is quite similar to the logic used by Derrida. Dilworth asserts that Nishida uses the "logic of contradictory identity" as a tool "to articulate the existential structures of the religious consciousness" (Dilworth, 127). This "logic of contradictory identity" can be traced back through Zen and other East Asian Buddhist traditions, through the Indian Mahāyāna schools and eventually to Nāgārjuna and, before him, the *Prajñāpāramita Sūtra* with its famous verse: "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form." "In providing an exhaustive set of the positive and negative possibilities of this paradoxical logical form Nāgārjuna wrote the methodic script, as it were, for the traditions of Indian and East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism" (Dilworth, 131). Nishida merely placed this logical method into modern philosophical terminology.

Nishida claims that this paradoxical logic is exclusively Eastern and he contrasts it to the Western logics of Aristotle, Kant and Hegel that are structured around the principle of identity. Dilworth disagrees with this assessment and sees this "logic of contradictory identity" appearing throughout the West. Dilworth finds it in Plato, in Shakespeare, in Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger and so on, and "it is conspicuously exhibited in the deconstructive writings of Jacques Derrida and other 'post-moderns'" (Dilworth, 132). Likewise, Dilworth notes that what Nishida calls "Western" logic can also be found in various Eastern schools of thought.

Dilworth then attempts to use Derrida to turn Nishida's "logic of contradictory identity" against Nishida's own division of "East" and "West." Dilworth writes "to speak of overarching traditions of texts – and to polarize them into 'Eastern' and 'Western' in the extreme case – is one of the shortest routes to the deconstruction, not to say obfuscation, of the authentic philosophical meanings of individual texts" (Dilworth, 138).

Generally, Dilworth's exposition of Derrida's thought is similar to what we have seen in Magliola, Coward and Mabbett. His central issue is the similarity of Nishida's logic, and therefore Nāgārjuna's, and the logical methods used by Derrida. Dilworth interestingly criticizes Derrida's own work as "procrustean" in a way that is reminiscent of Loy. He writes, "because Derrida's logic of *différance* entails a discursive procedure that is dynamically adversative, it proceeds to read the 'software' – here, the variety of philosophical texts with their several semantic integrities – through its own kind of polarizing filter" (Dilworth, 137). Like Loy, Dilworth seems to be saying that Derrida does not go far enough in applying deconstruction to the principles, like difference, that Derrida holds as his own. Also like Loy, Dilworth sees this paradoxical logic of Nishida, Nāgārjuna and Derrida as "revealing the nondual identity of the absolute and the relative" (Dilworth, 130) which for Loy, and we must assume for Dilworth, points to a middle way that does not favour the extremes of either nihilism or absolutism.

2.52) *C.W. Huntington*

C. W. Huntington's 1989 text, *The Emptiness of Emptiness* which is a study and a translation of Candrakīrti's *The Entry into the Middle Way*, contains, what Hungtington calls, a "linguistic interpretation" of Madhyamaka. This "lingusitic interpretation" is not primarily Derridean or deconstructive but derives from analytic and Wittgensteinian interpretations of Nāgārjuna's thought – interpretations that we cannot presently review. However, Huntington makes it clear that a "deconstructive approach" (Huntington, 30) is required and that the concerns of "modern deconstruction ...seem so near, in certain respects, to those of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti" (Huntington, xiv). It seems that Huntington is willing to include Derrida and deconstruction under his category of the "linguistic interpretation."

Huntington emphasizes that this interpretation really represents a "third phase" of Western interpretations of Madhyamaka. This phase is distinct from the first phase of early nihilist interpretations of Nāgārjuna, outlined in the first section of this paper, and the second "absolutist" phase represented by Schterbatsky and

more recently Murti. Huntington explicitly considers the third "linguistic interpretation" to be a middle way between the two previous extremes. According to this interpretation Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti "were adamant in their censure of both nihilism (*uccedavāda*) and its opposite, the so-called absolutism (*śaśvatāvāda*) of the Hindu philosophers, which is considered nothing more than an elaboration of the reified concept of being that underlies every form of epistemological and ontological monism" (Huntington, 29).

This middle way, therefore, is the main feature of the "linguistic interpretation" which sees the Madhyamaka "as a critique of meaning and the correspondence theory of truth, which had preceded it" (Huntington, 31). Obviously Derrida would feel at home along this middle way which is first marked by an attitude and set of concerns that is moderate and just, and secondly by a "particular sort of deconstructive philosophy which endows the Mādhyamika with its paradoxical 'non-position'" (Huntington, 36). Huntington's comparison, at this point, becomes very close to those already examined.

2.53) *Steve Odin*

Steve Odin's 1990 article "Derrida and the Decentred Universe of Chan/Zen Buddhism" is basically an application of Magliola's comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida extended more fully to Zen Buddhism and especially to Kyōto school philosophers, Nishida, Nishitani and Abe Masao. Odin refers also to Dilworth's work on Nishida and agrees that both Derrida and Nishida employ paradoxical logic. Derrida views the "trace" as being both present and absent, while for Nishida all things both "are" and "are not" (Odin, 66).

Odin asserts that Zen, and ultimately Nāgārjuna have influenced Nishitani, who uses the "post-modern language of 'decentring,' as well as "the deconstruction inherent in Nietzsche's positive nihilism" (Odin, 67), which has gone on to profoundly influence Derrida as well. Odin agrees with Magliola, that both Nāgārjuna and Derrida are philosophers of the middle way, and he argues that Nishitani follows the same "differential" logic of Nāgārjuna, "which itself establishes a Middle Path between substantial being and nihilistic nothingness such

as to avoid the philosophical extremes of 'eternalism' on the one side and 'annihilationism' on the other" (Odin, 67).

Abe, following Nāgārjuna's lead of showing the emptiness of emptiness itself, insists on writing *śūnyatā* with an X mark over it to prevent it from being "reified, absolutized or substantialized in any way whatsoever" (Odin, 69). Abe, Odin explains, borrows this from Heidegger who similarly crosses out *Sein* in his own work to demonstrate a provisional cancellation of Being. Derrida, of course, employs Heidegger's technique for the basis of his own strategy of placing all signification *sous rature*. This brings us back, in a rough circle, to Magliola's comparison of Derrida and Nāgārjuna. It would, of course, take an entirely new study to examine the philosophy of the Kyōto school in light of this comparison. Odin's article is a step towards this. For now it is enough to point out the many junctures that converge in this effort, and to show the importance for the middle way, in Odin's view, to tie it all together.

2.54) *Joseph Stephen O'Leary*

Joseph Stephen O'Leary's 1996 text *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth*, presents a very interesting and lucid comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida from the perspective of contemporary Christian theology that deserves an examination in some depth. O'Leary sets out to explore what "truth" means, or could mean, in modern Christian discourse. From the outset O'Leary insists that truth, for Christianity, must be open to a plurality of perspectives. It is primarily for this reason that he turns to Derrida and Buddhism. He writes:

> If a bridge can be built between contemporary philosophical awareness, the attraction of the Buddha, and the claims of Christian faith – three forces which uneasily co-exist in many searching minds – then a source of intellectual and spiritual headaches can be turned into a fruitful interplay of complementary perspectives. (O'Leary, 126)

This desire to establish a link between varied avenues of thought in order to arrive at cross-cultural solutions to certain facets of the current Western malaise, has already been exhibited here by Mabbett and Dilworth and Loy especially.

O'Leary can be added to their number with his penetrating question of how Christian beliefs can become relevant, in an open and just way, for today's world.

Derrida has been selected by O'Leary to aid in this endeavour because his efforts both tend to undo "the fixation on Truth with a capital 'T', which is the foundation of religious dogmatism" and at the same time exemplify "mistaken ideas about truth which are the staple of agnosticism" (O'Leary, 98). O'Leary claims that *différance*, which is central to Derrida's project, "erects a barrier against the recurring temptation of Western metaphysics: the lure of pure presence, absolute origins, and a language that is simply transparent to them" (O'Leary, 107). These are precisely the things that O'Leary wants to avoid in his new theological approach. But Derrida's "mistaken ideas" arise when these "myths of immediacy" are taken to be "truth" so that "when their demise is proclaimed to be the demise of truth, Derrida himself succumbs to metaphysics of presence" (O'Leary, 107).

O'Leary asserts that, beyond Derrida, Madhyamaka exposes us "still more fully to the power of the negative, luring us indeed to the brink of Absolute Nothingness" and yet if we are to believe the promises of this teaching, if we completely let go "of all secure identities" we will "find ourselves set back in touch with ultimate reality" (O'Leary, 126). Of singular importance to O'Leary's own project is the Madhyamaka teaching of "emptiness" which he hopes by revealing the empty and "straw-like fragility" of religious language, can restore this language "on fresh terms as a provisional means to be used adroitly and inventively in the search to know and to communicate truth" (O'Leary, 127). It is this somewhat ironic quest to establish a new, creative, and yet provisional and non-metaphysical, religious language for the communication of truth, which hastens O'Leary to turn to Derrida and Nāgārjuna. It is here that he hopes to find a teaching or a synthesis that could avoid both the nihilism of the atheism and agnosticism of the present, and the same intolerant forms of Christian absolutism that have wreaked so much havoc in the past.

In O'Leary's view Nāgārjuna obviously represents such a middle way teaching. O'Leary explains that Nāgārjuna's teaching of the middle way is a continuation of the Buddha's own teaching of dependent co-arising. "The

affirmation of dependent co-arising, implying recognition of regular causal sequence, avoids the extreme of nihilism, while the affirmation of emptiness, the insight that dependent co-arising undermines every claim to inherent existence, avoids the extreme of eternalism" (O'Leary, 129). Nāgārjuna's teaching of the middle way is therefore strictly orthodox. O'Leary notes, however, that Nāgārjuna's thought is often mistakenly reduced "to a solid ontology, either substantialist (absolutist) or nihilist" (O'Leary, 135). Interestingly, O'Leary also cautions that this teaching must not being taken as the position of the Middle Way. O'Leary states that the middle way is not a *position* at all but must be looked at as dynamic flow between, around and avoiding all static positions. Even emptiness is self-negated, thus preventing its own reification.

It is the extension of this middle non-position to language that most interests O'Leary. O'Leary contends, unlike Coward, that language is not at all rejected or viewed as something to be overcome by Nāgārjuna. Instead he sees in Madhyamaka an attempt to understand the relative and conventional nature of language in order to gain insight of the ultimate. The opposite of this "would be a mystic leap cutting short such attention to the conventional and leading in all likelihood to an absolutist or nihilist fixation" (O'Leary, 140). Therefore, emptiness "does not work against language and the logical but is the condition of their correct functioning" (O'Leary, 141). This perspective sets O'Leary apart from Magliola, who asserts that Nāgārjuna is applying a type of non-conventional logic against logic, and Coward, who claims that Nāgārjuna views language as an obstacle to overcome. O'Leary, in contrast, views Madhyamaka as being a school of thought that also has a middle way approach to language and representation:

> This middle path, which allows continued engagement with the language, thought and action of the empirical world, in the awareness of its radical inadequacy, escapes the nihilism which sees language as a futile game and the substantialism which would attach each word to a stable and a determinate referent. (O'Leary, 142)

Derrida's thinking cannot, according to O'Leary, be said to assure an avoidance of nihilism in the same way because all that Derrida offers is the dubious promise that "once freed of logocentric fixations, we shall find that all is

in order, and the ghostly perils of scepticism and nihilism will have disappeared" (O'Leary, 142). Buddhism, on the other hand, is in constant struggle against both nihilism and absolutism.

O'Leary's middle way interpretation of Buddhism would seem to place him within Huntington's "third phase" interpretational camp. However, O'Leary also disagrees with Huntington and again on linguistic grounds. O'Leary claims that Huntington's pragmatic "linguistic interpretation" fails in that it "admits no meaning in words outside their opportunistic use" (O'Leary, 144). That is, for Huntington, Nāgārjuna uses words and concepts pragmatically only in order to eradicate "the suffering caused by clinging, antipathy, and the delusion of reified thought" (quoted in O'Leary, 145). In contrast, O'Leary asserts that the teaching of emptiness – that all things lack inherent existence – is what finally can provide meaning to any "truth." "Far from destroying the conventional world-ensconced truths – such as the Four Holy Truths – it is emptiness which gives them their only logical basis" (O'Leary, 144). It is the very provisionality of truth that allows for truth. This is the point that O'Leary will return to in his discussion of the comparisons presented by Magliola and Loy.

To compare Nāgārjuna and Derrida obviously has its usefulness for O'Leary but he cautions that "such a collage is harmless only if it recognizes its poverty and does not take itself for a magisterial synthesis" (O'Leary, 147). O'Leary insists that Loy, in writing of "a strong ontotheological element" in Buddhism and other highly contentious statements, attempts this sort of too close synthesis. Loy, from O'Leary's perspective, presents a version of Buddhism where ultimate truth is seen as being delusional and the goal is to abandon all attempts to locate truth. This, for O'Leary, is a nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna's teaching. O'Leary, of course, is interested in using Buddhist concepts to freshly reinterpret Christian truths.

Robert Magliola, on the other hand, "errs in the opposite direction (substantialism)" (O'Leary, 148) because he views the conventional world of the everyday and everyday language as being logocentric and thereby unnecessarily substantializes it. However, it is possible, according to O'Leary, that critical

engagement in "worldly reality can respect everyday logic while also remaining conscious of the inbuilt antimonies that mark it as non-ultimate" (O'Leary, 148-149). That is, for O'Leary, everyday language should not be taken as a meaningless, pragmatic device or as wholly logocentric but as a "skilful means," or *upāya*, which allows language, and especially religious language, to "function in a freer, saner, more functional way" (O'Leary, 153) and at all times conscious of its underlying emptiness.

This notion of religious language as wholly and self-consciously, provisional and empty, acting as a "skilful means," would allow for terms like "God" to be used provisionally and according to a wide context instead of viewing it as the true designation of the ultimate, which it has largely and unskilfully become. Faith, according to O'Leary, would be rejuvenated because, "recognising the provisional and conventional character of all religious language, one is freed from reifications which impede spiritual freedom" (O'Leary, 152). Nāgārjuna's teaching, therefore, of the provisional, contextual and empty character of language is invaluable to contemporary theology.

Derrida, however, also has his use because it is through his thought that we are reminded that each designation is also provisional "by reason of its historical and cultural determination" (O'Leary, 152). This point is, indeed, so significant that modern adaptions of Buddhist emptiness must also widen their scope because of it. "After Wittgenstein and Derrida a convincing account of dependent co-arising has to take on board these hermeneutic or historicist inflections" (O'Leary, 152). Extended in this way by Derrida, Nāgārjuna's teaching opens the way for religious plurality by demonstrating the historical emptiness, or lack of pure self-identity, of all religions. In turn this, once again, points to the middle way of Derrida: "This reconceptualisation of Buddhist thought about the ultimate brings it near to the middle path of Derrida, the path of the 'between' which avoids freezing truth as presence, without thereby declaring it abolished" (O'Leary, 152).

Through his concentration on the concept of the middle way, therefore, it is an open question whether or not O'Leary avoided the "magisterial synthesis" of Nāgārjuna and Derrida that he cautioned others not to create. However, it is

obvious that he does see the middle way as being the crucial link between the two figures. It is also interesting that O'Leary, as in other comparisons, criticizes previous comparators for veering too far off the middle way – Loy is a nihilist, Magliola is a substantialist and so on. Everyone, it seems, is talking about the middle way but there is by no means a consensus as to what it is.

2.55) *Youxuan Wang*

Youxuan Wang is the last scholar whose work will be examined in this section. Wang's book *Buddhism and Deconstruction: Towards a Comparative Semiotics* is not a direct comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. It instead concentrates on an analysis of the Derrida's concept of the Same, and the similar concept of *samatā* in the writings of three Buddhist thinkers; Kumārajīva, Paramārtha, and Xuánzàng. While Nāgārjuna has to a greater or lesser degree, influenced these three, it is, once again, beyond the scope of this paper to discuss their ideas in depth. Wang's book does, however, say several important things about the general comparison of Madhyamaka thought and Derrida. Its 2001 date of publication is significant in itself as it shows the lasting interest in and relevance of this sort of comparison.

Wang sees the importance of the sign in both systems of thought as being one of the main bases for comparison. "Like the Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers who criticize the Hīnayāna as well as Tīrthakas for their failure to understand the notion of the true sign of all dharmas, Derrida criticises Western metaphysics as well as early anti-metaphysical philosophies for their failure to understand the question of the sign" (Wang, 13). Wang explains that unlike other Western critics of metaphysics, like Nietzsche, Heidegger and the structuralists, Derrida does not seek to transcend or destroy metaphysics because he realizes that language itself is metaphysical. Deconstruction is then metaphysics deconstructing itself not something that is launched from the outside. The anti-metaphysical philosophers before deconstruction have "all in one way or another fantasised a realm that is totally separated from metaphysics" (Wang, 207). In a similar way, Wang explains, "the 'Hīnayāna analysts' imagined a nirvanic space not the least contaminated by

worldly concerns" (Wang, 207-208). In this way, just as *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa* for Nāgārjuna, so-called "anti-metaphysical" language is still metaphysical. For Wang, it is Derrida's "breakthrough" in realizing that all Western thought is dominated by the metaphysics of the sign, of the fact that all philosophical concepts are merely signifiers which point to elusive "transcendental signifieds," that allows him this realization.

Wang, like Magliola and others, sees similarity between Derrida's method of deconstruction, and especially in the deconstruction of structuralism, and the process of negation used in Madhyamaka. Derrida usually commences by criticizing the use of causation in structuralist theories. He isolates the central structure within these theories and demonstrates the contextual and therefore indeterminate nature of the origin of that structure. In showing the emptiness of both origin and endpoint, Madhyamaka does the same. Derrida then demonstrates that this whole issue of structure is really about the sign – about the metaphysical belief that signifier really refers to a signified. Derrida's next move, as in Nāgārjuna and other Mādhyamikas, is to show that these two, signifier and signified, are interdependent and one and the same – "he abolishes the factual certainty of the sign by invoking non-dualism" (Wang, 192). In the end, Wang explains, "in the ruins of Western metaphysics, he erects a temporary tent and does not pretend that the resultant structure is totally free of metaphysics" (Wang, 192). This explanation of the function of deconstruction both has its similarities and differences to Magliola's reading. Wang stands out in his insistence that Derrida readily acknowledges that his writing is also metaphysical.

Wang hastens to point out, however, that Derrida is not, even philosophically, a Buddhist. Wang writes, "there is no evidence that Derrida is familiar with Buddhist philosophical literature, or that he has made a Boddhisattva's vow to save all sentient beings from their suffering" (Wang, 218). Wang, unlike Coward and perhaps Mabbett, recognizes no soteriological element in Derrida. More significantly from a philosophical perspective, is that Derrida and Madhyamaka have different thinking on the question of "origins," that, according to Wang, "forbids us to equate deconstruction with Madhyamaka" (Wang, 199).

Wang insists that however much Derrida criticizes the metaphysics of presence and essentialist readings of all texts including his own, that "his deconstruction is motivated by an overwhelming desire to reach an origin" (Wang, 199). Even though Derrida would claim that such an "origin" would, like everything else, be linked to the contextual interplay of the traces and *différance*, Wang notes that in all his writing Derrida still is analysing "the *production* of meaning" (Wang, 199). Derrida, it seems, is still concerned with foundational principles that the Buddhists have long since discarded.

Wang does, however, highlight one last point of contact between Derrida and Madhyamaka that other comparisons have neglected to mention. Just as the critics of deconstruction always ask: how can metaphysics be deconstructed without using metaphysical language? The critics of the emptiness doctrine of Nāgārjuna and others also ask: "if all dharmas are empty how can language, which is an instance of dharma, be employed to communicate this doctrine?" (Wang, 216). Wang explains that the answers respectively given to these questions are quite similar. Derrida gives "his text the status of expedience or *bricolage*" while the Mādhyamikas describe their use of meaning only as a "skilful means" (Wang, 216). Both accept that their use of language is only provisional, which O'Leary has also noted.

Wang does not explicitly claim that Nāgārjuna or Derrida are philosophers of the middle way but it is clear from his writing that it would be extremely difficult to interpret them from either the perspectives of nihilism or absolutism. In Wang's view both act to expose metaphysical positions but both also acknowledge that these positions, while empty and arbitrary are also a part of everyday and philosophical discourse.

CHAPTER THREE: Criticism and Response

3.1) *Introduction*

In addition to the criticisms levelled at each other by those scholars attempting to compare the work of Nāgārjuna and Derrida, a number of criticisms of this form of comparative exercise have appeared in tandem with the

comparisons themselves. As we have seen, the main focus of critical attention that the comparators heap on each other is that the other's comparison is clouded by an either absolutist or nihilist interpretation of either Derrida or Nāgārjuna. Thus, according to Coward, Loy's reading of Derrida is nihilistic, while Coward's interpretation of Buddhism is absolutist for Magliola, and for O'Leary, Loy's view of Buddhism is overly nihilistic and Magliola's interpretation is "substantialist." Each, according to the others, fails to stay true to the middle way.

In contrast, the criticisms that have been launched from outside of this particular branch of comparative philosophy tend to argue that there really is no basis for comparison at all. The argument of this paper is, of course, that one basis for comparison between Nāgārjuna and Derrida is that both, from their own highly different perspectives, point to a middle way approach between nihilism and absolutism. This is not to say that this basis of this comparison is correct, but only that it reveals a profound concern for a middle way perspective in contemporary culture. The criticisms of this exercise, therefore, while potentially damaging the feasibility of presenting a meaningful comparison, do not alter the fact that many of these comparisons have been published, and, at least as of 2001, are still being published. The following criticisms are important to the present study, precisely because they reveal the difficulty of this type of comparison which makes the question of "why compare?" all the more relevant. We can answer this question by agreeing with the critics and insist that no real insight is gained from these comparisons, or we can take Tuck's approach and examine the motives behind those making the comparisons. In the criticisms that follow, it is interesting to note that the critics all tend to stress that the nihilistic character of deconstruction makes comparison of it with religious philosophies, like Nāgārjuna's that are centred on certain ethical and soteriological ends, entirely untenable.

3.2) *Richard Hayes*

Richard P. Hayes' 1994 article "Nāgārjuna's Appeal" presents a criticism of not only the comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida, but also of comparisons of Nāgārjuna with other Western schools of thought including Absolutism and

Logical Positivism. In his introduction Hayes notes two observations. He observes both the lack of effect Nāgārjuna's writings have had on subsequent Indian Buddhist philosophy and, in contrast, the relatively significant amount of attention given to these writings by Western scholars. He sets out to discover why this discrepancy exists, and in doing so, to explain what is it that Western scholars find appealing about Nāgārjuna. He explains that a possible common reason for these two observations "could simply be that Nāgārjuna's arguments, when examined closely, turn out to be fallacious and therefore not very convincing to a logically astute reader" (Hayes, 299).

Hayes argues that the *MMK* is deeply flawed by Nāgārjuna's use of an "informal fallacy of equivocation" (Hayes, 325) by which Nāgārjuna plays with the ambiguities inherent in the technical terms that he employs. Hayes points out that in the *MMK*, "the word 'svabhāva' can be interpreted in two different ways. It can be rendered either as **identity** ... or as **causal independence**. Similarly, the word 'parabhāva' can be interpreted in two ways ... as **difference** ... or as **dependence**" (Hayes, 312). It will not be necessary to plot out in detail the analysis of the Sanskrit that Hayes provides in depth. It will be sufficient to note that Hayes demonstrates that in exploiting certain ambiguities in his terms, Nāgārjuna makes his arguments by committing logical fallacies. Hayes is also in agreement with the analytical interpretation of Nāgārjuna's writings by Richard Robinson first presented in the nineteen-fifties.

Robinson stresses that while Nāgārjuna used standard logic, he continually made mistakes in applying this logic. Robinson refers to the "trick" that Nāgārjuna uses to apparently defeat the arguments of his opponents. The "trick," writes Robinson, "consists of (a) reading into the opponent's views a few terms which one defines for him in a self-contradictory way, and (b) insisting on a small set of axioms which are at variance with common sense and not accepted in their entirety by any known philosophy" (quoted in Hayes, 324). Robinson insists that this application of the "trick" in no way demonstrates "the inadequacy of reason and experience to provide intelligible answers to the usual philosophical questions"

(quoted in Hayes, 325), which is exactly what Nāgārjuna, in Robinson's view, sets out but fails to do.

In another study Robinson graciously concedes, however, that Nāgārjuna may not have intentionally tried to slip the wool over our eyes, but may have only been subject to the crude state of formal logic in India at that time. Indeed, even Plato committed logical fallacies like denying the antecedent, which Robinson also charges Nāgārjuna with committing, and which was accepted in Greek philosophy until it was later recognized as being logically invalid by Aristotle (Hayes, 324). Apparently Aristotle's correction was not yet heard in India by the time of Nāgārjuna.

Hayes sums up these logical errors and inconsistencies as primarily, but not exclusively, stemming from Nāgārjuna's misuse of the term *svabhāva*: "not only did Nāgārjuna use the term 'svabhāva' in ways that none of his opponents did, but he himself used it in different senses at key points in his argument" (Hayes, 325). Throughout his paper, and especially in his appendix where various English translations of the *MMK* are presented in parallel fashion, Hayes convincingly demonstrates that Western (and Indian) translators and interpreters of Nāgārjuna have had to use different, and often non-synonymous, terms to translate words that Nāgārjuna uses ambiguously, in order to make sense of his work. Hayes argues that this overlooking of Nāgārjuna's logical inconsistencies has allowed several Western misinterpretations and comparisons with Western philosophy. The comparison of Nāgārjuna with Derrida is just one example of this sort of misinterpretation.

Hayes points to the efforts of Magliola, Huntington and Dilworth, providing a brief, and largely dismissive, sketch of their comparisons, as representatives of the "deconstructionist interpretation" of Nāgārjuna. The key and crucial flaw in this interpretation, according to Hayes, is that it is dependent on the assumption that "Nāgārjuna makes use of a variety of what we have been calling deviant logic" (Hayes, 350). "Deviant logic" in this sense, means specifically that Nāgārjuna is ignoring, or purposefully breaching the law of contradiction and the law of the excluded middle in his logical argument. Hayes argues, therefore, that

the success of this type of comparative argument "hinges on whether one concludes (1) that Nāgārjuna was deliberately using a form of logic not based on the laws of contradiction and excluded middle or (2) that he was using a standard logic but made mistakes in using it" (Hayes, 350). Hayes obviously argues the second over the first – Nāgārjuna's logic is standard but in error and those that conclude his logic is deviant are also in error.

Dilworth, as we have seen, does insist that Nāgārjuna employs what Nishida calls "the logic of contradictory identity," though Nāgārjuna is joined in this use with many other thinkers of both the East and West. Magliola, in arguing that Nāgārjuna and Derrida use the same logical techniques to decentre self-identities and avoid binary extremes, could be said to be advocating that Nāgārjuna is using deviant logic, but he does not explicitly say this. Huntington, however, bases his comparison of Nāgārjuna and several recent Western thinkers, including Derrida, on their mutual "critique of meaning and the correspondence theory of truth" (Huntington, 31). He does not find it necessary to compare logical techniques. Hayes, perhaps in recognizing this, does not directly criticize Huntington. Instead he calls Huntington's effort "a sensitive attempt to interpret Mādhyamika philosophy in the light of such modern thinkers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida and Rorty" (Hayes, 349).

Other scholars, examined here, who have offered comparisons, have also not felt the need to stress the common penchant in Nāgārjuna and Derrida for logical deviance. O'Leary, as was noted, highlights the fact that emptiness "does not work against language and the logical but is the condition of their correct functioning" (O'Leary, 141). O'Leary, aware of studies that attempt to show the deviance of Nāgārjuna's logic – and especially in his apparent insistence that things neither exist nor do not exist, refers to a study which claims "that Nāgārjuna's denial of inherent existence and inherent non-existence does not entail a real transgression of the excluded middle" (O'Leary, 130).

Ian Mabbett, in his own comparison which argues that both figures employ the four-fold logic of the tetralemma and also criticize the logic of binary oppositions, nonetheless argues that Derrida and Nāgārjuna use standard logic. In

discussing deconstructive logic he asks: "Is this to propose for deconstruction a new set of rules of logic, in which the middle between affirmation and denial is allowed in?" (Mabbet, 214). He replies in the negative. Instead, like Madhyamaka, he insists, deconstructive methods do not represent a new type of deviant logic, rather "normal logic is used to analyze statements" which are "allowed to discredit themselves by their own rules" (Mabbett, 214). In other words standard logic is applied to reach non-standard, and intentionally indeterminate, conclusions. Mabbett continues: "However, when the discrediting is achieved, this analysis leads to the conclusion that the realities to which the statements ostensibly refer are indeterminate. At this point, a variety of statements, contradictory or otherwise, are seen to be as good or bad as each other" (Mabbett, 214).

Hayes concludes his section on the deconstructive interpretation by stating that "this approach probably offers rather little insight into Nāgārjuna's argumentation" (Hayes, 351). This may well be the case, although outside of Magliola's bold claim that "moderners" cannot understand Nāgārjuna without Derrida, few claim that deconstruction "explains" Madhyamaka, only that they are comparable. Hayes' next point, that "the Deconstructive interpretation of Mādhyamika helps to preserve the demonstrably false conclusion that Nāgārjuna used logic to destroy logic" (Hayes, 351), is itself, as we have just seen, not claimed by several of those scholars who compared these two bodies of thought. Instead, they emphasize that Nāgārjuna and Derrida are comparable in part because of their similar use of standard logic. In reaching this conclusion they may be in error. Hayes' claim that the basis for this line of comparison is an erroneous assumption that Nāgārjuna applied deviant logic, however, is clearly not in conformity with these conclusions. Future studies may show that these conclusions are untenable but it is not my part presently to argue one side or the other. Leave logic for the logicians. However, it would seem given the variety of approaches to this question, therefore, that a similar use of logic, either standard or deviant, is not the central reason for the comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. On this issue Francisco Varela writes "A modern philosopher might believe himself able to find faults with Nagarjuna's logic. Even if this were the case, however, it would not

overturn the epistemological and psychological force of Nagarjuna's argumentation within the context of his concern" (Varela, 223).

Those like Dilworth, Nishida, Nishitani and Odin who *do* claim explicitly that Nāgārjuna is using deviant logic, still clearly have much in common with scholars like Mabbett, O'Leary and others who explicitly claim that Nāgārjuna's logic is standard. There is certainly something else that motivates these comparisons. I have suggested throughout that this common motivation is a concern for arriving at a middle way between nihilism and absolutism.

Hayes also refers to the middle way as the central concern of Nāgārjuna, although his sense of this is different from the views of those examined presently. Hayes explains that Nāgārjuna is specifically attempting to refute two extreme views of the continuity of the self after death. The first view is of *ucchedavāda* or "discontinuity." It stipulates that "the self is identical with the physical body and the physically generated mental events; when the body dies, so does the mind, and hence so does the self" (Hayes, 301). The second view, or "limit," called *śāśvatavāda* or "perpetuity," is that "the self is not identical with and is separate from the body-mind complex so that the self continues to exist after the decomposition of the body and mental events therein" (Hayes, 301). The middle way, therefore, is precisely a stance beyond these extreme views of the "discontinuity" and the "perpetuity" of the self. "Nāgārjuna's position, and indeed the position of Buddhist doctrine in general, is said to be a position in between these two limits" (Hayes, 301). Hayes stresses, however, that this interpretation of Nāgārjuna's middle way does not imply automatic equivalence with a middle way between nihilism and absolutism that is emphasized by most comparators.

Hayes stresses that Nāgārjuna is basically in agreement with the entire spectrum of Buddhist thought, including the Abhidharma, insofar as it argues against the idea of a definite self-identity – which, in turn, is the source of all unhappiness. Nāgārjuna's dispute with the Abhidharma arises because whereas the latter sees the self as a "complex being" that is nothing outside of a collection of "simple beings" or *dharmas*, Nāgārjuna is arguing that "not only do complex beings lack an identity and therefore an ultimate reality, but so do simple beings"

(Hayes, 306). It is in making this argument where Hayes feels that Nāgārjuna commits errors in his logic.

It is also in this second turn, which argues against all self-identities, simple and complex, that almost all of the scholars examined here stress is one of the key areas of comparison with Derrida. The doctrines of *ucchedavāda* and *śāśvatavāda*, which Hayes translates as "discontinuity" and "perpetuity," are stretched given this wider critique of identity, perhaps inaccurately, to mean "annihilationism" or "nihilism," and "substantialism," "eternalism," or "absolutism." These doctrines are then viewed, again perhaps inaccurately as we will soon examine, as being similar to modern notions of nihilism and absolutism and the path of Nāgārjuna is seen as an alternative to these extremes. Whether or not Nāgārjuna successfully argues his case, he certainly provides grist for the mill of this line of thinking.

Hayes further explains "Nāgārjuna's view of the Buddha's teaching was that it served to help people achieve happiness by dispelling all opinions (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇa*). Presumably, Nāgārjuna saw his own task as helping readers achieve the same goals by the same means" (Hayes, 307). Hayes suggests that Nāgārjuna attempted to do this "by showing that in the final analysis opinions have no subject matters" (Hayes, 307). Again, whether or not Nāgārjuna is successful in this from the perspective of logical analysis, it is argued by most of the authors of the comparisons that Nāgārjuna's goal to dispel all opinions is very comparable to Derrida's stress on indeterminacy. Derrida's efforts might also be unsuccessful, as many have argued, but that has not prevented them from being widely applied.

Hayes claims that it was because of Nāgārjuna's logical errors that he was not paid much attention by later Indian Buddhist philosophers. This may well be the case. However, it is also the case that Nāgārjuna's ideas were taken up and widely applied in countries such as Tibet, China and Japan where, for the latter two especially, paradoxical logic was used to express Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings in the tradition, it is held, of Nāgārjuna himself. Scholars such as Nishida, Nishitani and Dilworth, who also claim Nāgārjuna's logic is paradoxical, are modern representatives of this tradition. It would seem that if the goal is to dispel and destroy opinions then paradoxical logic should be welcomed in any theoretical

arsenal. If, in the final analysis, Nāgārjuna did not use this type of logic but only applied standard logic fallaciously, it does not seem that he would be opposed to its use if it was applied as a means to these ends.

Finally, in his own eisegetical reading of the modern interpreters of Nāgārjuna and their willingness to overlook his logical errors, Hayes notes that twentieth century thought has been dominated by moral scepticism and the criticism of metaphysics. Hayes suggests one big reason that might explain the predominance of these two tendencies is that the last century (and so far our own as well), "has been an era of almost constant warfare, or at least an incessant preparedness for war, in nearly every region of the planet" (Hayes, 327). This has led intellectuals to be extremely suspicious and sceptical of claims, usually representing a certain metaphysical or political position, of the need to act on behalf of some moral absolute. These claims take the form of binary oppositions, positing one term – God, the Nation, Civilization, Freedom, Democracy etc., over a second term which usually represents a dark, foreign, tyrannical and evil Other. The two sides are mutually exclusive and there is no permitted middle position – "Either you are with us, or with the terrorists!"

Hayes explains that one interpretation of the emptiness of all *dharmas* is that "no teachings or doctrines or ideologies of any kind are absolutely and irrefutably true" (Hayes, 327). This interpretation is extremely appealing to those who are absolutely sick and appalled by destructive and divisive moral absolutism. This is precisely what Hayes views as being what attracts modern scholars to Nāgārjuna. However, the danger in this interpretation of Nāgārjuna is a completely meaningless, "anything goes" type relativism that can also be quite destructive. It is my contention here that the appeal of contemporary scholars for thinkers like Nāgārjuna and Derrida is not simply because they represent a theoretical foil against moral absolutism, but also because scholars see in these thinkers an attempt to avoid just this sort of nihilistic relativism as well. Most comparators argue that both Nāgārjuna and Derrida accept metaphysics, and Hayes argues this as well (Hayes, 344 and 347), but they also argue that both figures attempt to limit the

reification of metaphysical positions and thus the abuses of power or suffering that arise from them.

Hayes acknowledges that modern scholars, and especially of the deconstructive interpretation, are attracted to Nāgārjuna because of his stand against absolutism, but he chooses not to emphasize that Nāgārjuna is also attractive for his stand against nihilism. Hayes seems to suggest that the main motivations for attempting a comparison of this sort are to engage in meaningless theoretical play and to take another kick at traditional metaphysics, standard logic and common sense. If this were the case there would be surely little to write about. Against this nihilistic interpretation of this enterprise, however, is the view that these comparisons represent a meaningful attempt to find a middle possibility between two extreme, rigid and destructive positions.

3.3) *Agehananda Bharati*

The next criticism comes in the form of 1992 book review of Harold Coward's *Derrida and Indian Philosophy*, which we have looked at in depth. The reviewer, Agehananda Bharati, argues, like Hayes, that this type of comparison has no real basis. Bharati's main criticism of this work is that Coward fails to admit that Derrida has no interest at all in Eastern thought. According to Bharati, Coward "does not stress sufficiently that Derrida never cared for Indian or any non-Western thought; his thinking world, including its deconstruction, ends about an hour's jet flight east of Paris" (Bharati, 339). Derrida is criticized for his Eurocentrism, and Coward is criticized for attempting a comparison of such widely divergent philosophies. Bharati commends Coward's attempt, which Bharati does consider well conceived and valuable, but he stresses that Coward misses the essential difference between Eastern and Western thought. "No effort, however, valiant and well-meant, should disabuse us of the fact that nobody from Kant to Heidegger, Rorty, and Derrida has been interested in *mokṣa*, while nobody from Nāgārjuna to Bharṭṛhari and Śaṃkara has not" (Bharati, 340).

Bharati rejects Coward's contention that Derrida is engaged in a process of "spiritual realization" and further notes that this term is nothing more than "an

overworked and overrated neologism of the Hindu Renaissance brought into vogue by Vivekananda around the turn of the century" (Bharati, 341). "Spiritual realization," he argues, is not the translation for any Sanskrit term and, therefore, has no similarity to any of the soteriological ends that inspire Indian thought. According to Bharati, by applying this term to deconstruction "Coward neo-Hinduizes Derrida" (Bharati, 341). Bharati admits that both Nāgārjuna and Derrida "may be deconstructing language and reality" but he insists that their respective approaches are so different that comparison between them is largely meaningless. "But whatever language and reality mean to the two, they are different, albeit bearing family resemblances; their methods are radically different, and there is no family resemblance between these methods" (Bharati, 343).

Finally, however, Bharati somewhat curiously concludes that whatever the vast differences between Derrida and Nāgārjuna both in methods, purposes and backgrounds, that somehow Coward's effort "is a valuable, scholarly exercise" that is on "solid and fascinatingly important ground" (Bharati, 342-3). Bharati, perhaps more than Hayes, does seem to see some value in this type of comparative project. Bharati also mentions the work of Magliola and Loy, both of whom Coward also mentions. Bharati calls Loy's work "important," while Coward is lightly criticized for being "too charitable about [Magliola's] preceding effort" (Bharati, 340).

More curious is that whereas Bharati seems to negatively charaterize the attempt to make a comparison of any Western and Indian thinker as stemming from "a desire for some sort of intellectual ecumenism" (Bharati, 340), he sees a much greater basis for comparison of Indian thinkers with analytical philosophy. These thinkers, including Nāgārjuna, "could provide intertextuality with linguistic philosophy beginning with Wittgenstein and continuing into the official anglophone academic philosophy of today" (Bharati, 340). In this, it is obvious that an eisegetical reading of Bharati's own review reveals a certain analytical bias. It seems that comparative philosophy, no matter how different the subjects of comparison are, is not the problem. The problems arise when a particular *type* of comparison is presented. We will see this pattern repeated in two further criticisms.

Hayes refers to articles by Carl A. Raschke and Huston Smith as examples of general criticisms of the "post-modern" study of religion, which presumably also includes the comparison of Nāgārjuna and Derrida. Neither of these articles mentions this comparison so it will be unnecessary to discuss them at length. They do, however, offer some general criticisms to the "post-modern" approaches perhaps taken by the scholars examined here, from two respected scholars of religious studies.

3.4) *Raschke and Smith*

Raschke writes that "post-modernity amounts to a redescription of logic as 'aesthetics,' of message as medium, of communication as dramatics, of truth as embodiment" (Raschke, 672). Elsewhere he writes that "post-modern works of scholarship" – and the articles of Magliola and some of the others would surely be considered postmodern by Raschke, Bharati and Hayes – "have deliberately avoided 'argumentation,' because they are regalia of a 'style' more than a discipline" (Raschke, 673). Derrida is particularly criticized for his emphasis of style over substance. Raschke complains of "the sometimes maddening penchant of 'deconstructionists' for word-games and punning" (Raschke, 674), and of "two-dimensional Derridean wordgrams with their curious, Dadaist messages of inconsequentiality" (Raschke, 685).

This also reminds one of Hayes' dismissals of Magliola's "principal" comparative strategy of quoting from Zen and Chan literature and indulging "in a bit of deconstructive play with the Chinese characters used to convey key Mādhyamika terms" (Hayes, 349). To be fair to Magliola (who gets picked on often it seems), I have presented his ideas in depth without seeing the need to mention this "principal strategy." Once again we may note, from an eisegetical perspective, a not-so-hidden prejudice against the "playfulness" of postmodern style.

Where does this prejudice arise? Raschke seems to partially answer this question. Derrida's playfulness, he writes, leads only to "a 'joyless' chain of paralogisms, which turn out to be transgressions without conquests, wounds

without healings, lesions without disclosures" (Rashke, 674). Derrida's thought, like the entire "post-modern" project, is a complete nihilism. "Derrida himself has failed to intuit his own nihilism, the nihilism of an ongoing textual commentary no longer capable of signification" (Rashke, 674). Here we see repeated the claim that postmodern analysis is merely nihilistic, theoretical play that aims to discredit and abandon traditional metaphysics and ethics, standard logic and common sense, and to replace them with precisely nothing. As religion, and this includes Nāgārjuna, obviously does have particular soteriological and ethical goals in mind this nihilistic approach has nothing to teach us about religion.

Huston Smith takes exactly this view in his own article. He writes that in "doubting that a deep structure exists," postmodernism "settles for the constantly-shifting configurations of the phenomenal world" (Smith, 653). Smith contrasts this settling for the phenomenal with the focus of religion, which is necessarily transcendent. Smith refers to William James' characterization of religion as affirming "that the best things are the more eternal things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word" (quoted in Smith, 654), as being exactly the type of statement that the postmodernists love to pounce upon as being essentialist or referential. Postmodernism threatens the study of religion by depriving it of the language it requires "to say what needs to be said" (Smith, 654). Terms like "metaphysics" and "hierarchy" are constantly being devalued in postmodern discourse, and Smith laments this coercive limitation of expression: "[Postmodernism] is reshaping language in ways that make it difficult to consider the *possibility* of ontological transcendence without being charged with speaking ineptly" (Smith, 663).

Smith explains that in opposition to the traditional religious worldview that a hierarchy of being exists, and also in opposition to the modernist worldview which also rejects this hierarchy but flattens it into a one-dimensional "scientism," "postmodernism rejects all worldviews" (Smith, 660). Instead, postmodernism takes the "world" out of "worldviews" and we are left with an ever-turning, ever-transforming kaleidoscope of equally valid and thus equally meaningless "views." Smith refers to this type of epistemology as "holism." "Theoretical holism" argues

that all concepts must be placed within the context of their respective theoretical systems, whereas "practical holism" extends this context to include social backgrounds and practices. No conceptual construct can exist in isolation.

Smith illustrates his own discomfort with the "holism" of postmodern thought with an anecdote of some potted tropical trees he observed while lecturing in Malaysia. The observable parts of the flowering trees to him represent "theoretical holism" while the unseen roots represent the greater context of social practices and backgrounds. The clay pots, however, are indicative of the failure of "holism" because kept in separation from its natural ecosystem the soil would be depleted and the trees would die. Likewise, "holism," shut off in its own separate realm of endlessly self-referring human discourse from the natural and super-natural "world," is inherently stagnant and auto-destructive. In a burst of Nietzschean fury, Smith writes: "I wanted to smash those pots that draw hermeneutic circles around historical horizons and forms-of-life, as if they were isolated and self-enclosed – shut off from other forms of life, and from the trans-human world as well" (Smith, 662).

Derrida's deconstruction is acceptable in principle for Smith in that it seems to hold that no theoretical construct can explain everything, which would seem also to imply that there is "*something*" outside of or beyond such constructs. However deconstruction, like all forms of postmodern "holism," fails to "reconstruct." Instead it insists that any such talk of an "outside" or a "beyond" would also need to be deconstructed. Deconstruction is, therefore, just another form of nihilistic, self-isolating "holism." According to Smith "it pulls against the wholeness that religion – and all life – reaches out for" (Smith, 664).

In Smith's criticism we see repeated a very similar claim as those made, although with different ends in mind, by Hayes, Bharati and Raschke. That is, that deconstruction, and "postmodernism" in general (whether or not these two are really compatible involves another huge debate which falls outside the set limits of this study), concerns itself exclusively with the interplay of textuality within human discourse and language. It has no interest or hope in any form of soteriology or anything that would transcend the linguistic, and so it is incapable of

offering any insights on the study of religion – including of course Buddhism and Nāgārjuna. It is, in fact, nihilistic.

What does Derrida, the chief spokesperson of deconstruction, have to say about this type of criticism? He writes:

> I never cease to be 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. The critique of logocentrism is above else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language.' Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call 'post-structuralism' amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words – and other stupidities of that sort. (quoted in Caputo, 16)

Derrida explains in the same passage that his task is not to deny the "other" that is beyond words, but to challenge the traditional view of it being a "referent" in the linguistic sense. Derrida would, in all probability, extend this challenge to Smith's insistence on the "wholeness" that religion and all life strive for, and perhaps also to James' characterization of religion, but Derrida would not deny the "other" that these statements refer to. According to John Caputo's careful reading of Derrida, Derrida also rejects the claim, which is Smith's claim, that there is nothing undeconstructible in deconstruction. Derrida, Caputo comments, frequently insists that it is the undeconstructible which provides the necessary "impulse" or "drive" for deconstruction (Derrida 1997, 128). Caputo hastens to add, however, that this is not a return to some sort of "transcendental signified" or "foundationalism" but is "beyond both foundationalism and anti-foundationalism" (Derrida 1997, 128). "There is nothing outside of the text" continues to mean that there is no reference without the endless play of differences which is bound up with everything.

A second common point of criticism, which is related to the first but is perhaps nearer to the mark, is that Derrida and Nāgārjuna are simply too different to be comparable. Their countries, traditions, languages, historical conditions, occupations, objectives etc. are all incredibly different. Beyond comparing apples and oranges, to compare these two is like comparing apples and aardvarks. There

is then no way of knowing if any of their ideas, including any mention of either "nihilism" or "absolutism" or words of similar meaning, have any sort of commonality given the immense differences in context.

This leads to a deeper criticism that is not explicitly mentioned by any of the previous critics. That is, according to most readings of Nāgārjuna and Derrida – and especially the middle way readings we have focused on here, both figures stand adamantly opposed to "essentialism" of all shapes and shades. If that is so, what is it that we are comparing when we compare "Nāgārjuna" and "Derrida?" Obviously we cannot say that we are comparing the "essential" Derrida to the "essential" Nāgārjuna because according to both (according to this reading) the essence of a thing is never found in and of itself. If, on the other hand, we ignore the anti-essentialist interpretations of the two it would seem like there is little to compare between them.

To make these comparisons, therefore, one is in effect never comparing Nāgārjuna and Derrida but always comparing different interpretations of the two. Does this admission that the act of comparison, in this instance, always involves only the comparison of interpretations negate the value of the comparison? – For the purposes of this study: no. In choosing the interpretations he or she would attempt to compare, the comparator is already revealing something of what motivates his or her comparison. As I have indicated throughout, a primary motivation for this comparison is a desire for a middle way approach between absolutism and nihilism. That, as the critics point out, there is probably little commonality between the actual views of Nāgārjuna and Derrida (but the debate continues to rage about whether we can ever get to their "actual" views) does not, in itself, diminish the value of the comparison. Such criticisms do not challenge the motivations of the comparators nor do they prevent the comparisons from be applied widely in different ways. It is to these applications, and possible applications, that the last section will turn to.

CHAPTER FOUR: Applications of the Middle Way

This chapter will briefly examine several studies in a wide variety of different fields where aspects of a general comparison between Nāgārjuna and 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 the following 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.

4.1) *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, as we have seen in the first chapter, 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 *Avataṃṣaka Sūtra.*

This sūtra 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? In the previous chapter, we have already seen Derrida specifically refute these charges. 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. Derrida sees no such separation of language from the rest of life, nor does he favour one over the other.

4.2) *O'Leary, Abe and Theological Applications*

We have seen, in the last chapter, how 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 Abe Masao'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 escapes 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.

4.3) *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, of course, been a major theme of the comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida – the latter representing one of the most recent and potent philosophical forces behind this process. It has been emphasized throughout, 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" – the most obvious and disturbing recent 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). Dallymayr 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 a recent 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)

4.4) *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 his or 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" (Varela, 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 *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.

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.

CONCLUSION

It has been the assertion throughout this work that the primary motivation for the many comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida has been the profound concern to conceptualize a middle way between nihilism and absolutism. These comparisons, often quite different in scope and conclusions, have arisen in the face of strong criticism that these two thinkers are simply too diverse to merit serious comparative effort. Despite these criticisms we have seen that the type of middle way perspectives that emerge from these types of comparisons have been applied to a wide variety of disciplines. We may here reflect upon various themes and conclusions that have characterized this discussion.

From the first chapter, and especially from Tuck's survey of the Western interpretations of Nāgārjuna, we have seen that the so-called "middle way" interpretation of Nāgārjuna is only very recent in the West. Nāgārjuna has been previously, and still is for some, interpreted as being a nihilist or an absolutist. Both of these interpretations may be explained easily enough as both have been discussed at length in modern Western philosophy. The perspective of the middle way, however, seems much more difficult to elucidate perhaps because of its recent appearance. In this concluding section, therefore, it may be fruitful to summarize and somewhat synthesize what the various scholars assembled here have meant by the middle way.

In this, it will be useful to look again at Loy's discussion of Indra's Net as this provocative image from the *Flower Garland Sūtra* may be used as a device to tie the various themes of this paper together. Indra's Net best describes the worldview of the middle way. In this Net there is no centre and no origin. All elements are in constant transformation and in total inter-penetration and

interdependence on each other as each element is completely empty of own-being in Nāgārjuna's sense. Thich Nhat Hanh explains this Net is none other than the world in which we live where even the most mundane things, like a sheet of paper, are completely inseparable from all other things. In Varela's discussion of enactive cognitive science, this image of the Net can be used to illustrate the sense of cognition as "bringing forth a world" where the cognitive agent is in no way separate from the world that he or she perceives, but rather the world and the agent unfold together in the same act of cognition. The Net is ecological in that it is a complex network of elements that grow and evolve together within a mutual, all-encompassing exchange of matter and energy, but it goes far beyond what we commonly view as "ecology." Loy's term "cosmic ecology" is better as it refers not only to living things and their environment, currently observed by science, but to all things whatsoever including cultures, technologies, cognition, ideas, beings, languages, worlds and so on. All are a part of the Net as all are empty of own-being.

Throughout this study many scholars have argued that the crucial difference between Nāgārjuna and Derrida is that their respective views of language and its relation to the world are radically different. Scholars like Loy argue that while Nāgārjuna extends the notion of emptiness to cover all things including language, Derrida sees only language as being an unending play of differences and does not apply his analysis to anything else. Thus Derrida is said to be "trapped in textuality" and therefore nihilistic. However, as Derrida scholars like Caputo and Derrida himself have argued this is simply not the case. Derrida, instead, asserts that all of reality acts like language, in that independent elements do not exist and all unfolds within an ever-changing context.

What this means, therefore, to refer again to the image of Indra's Net, is that language, like everything else, appears in so many "jewels" of the Net. There is absolutely no separation between language and "reality." Language, like every other thing, and in response to Huston Smith's concerns about "holism," evolves and transforms itself in mutual interdependence with all other things. To argue that there are no "transcendental signifiers" in language is to make the case that there is

no transcendent realm at all. In Nāgārjuna's terms *nirvāṇa* is *saṃsāra.* There is no difference between the immanent and transcendent realms. Unlike in Platonism, and in much of Western philosophy, there is no discussion of two realms. There is no Absolute beyond, behind and before this phenomenal world. The teaching of Indra's Net, however, does not deny there are infinite worlds and dimensions parallel to our own – and the *Flower Garland* literature refers to infinite inter-penetrating Buddha-realms – but only that each of these worlds and dimensions is also empty are therefore interdependent on all others.

The middle way perspective that Indra's Net illustrates rejects the view of a ground or foundation or centre from which all else emanates, but it also rejects the despair and frantic grasping for a new centre that characterizes nihilism. All forms of grasping are abandoned in favour of an acceptance of groundlessness both within and without oneself. The teaching of Buddhism, and some would argue of Derrida, is that this grasping for a ground that really does not exist, for a permanent entity or state that is apart from and beyond the world, is what leads to suffering. Not only, however, does this apply to the grasping for an ultimate or absolute ground, but also the far more common grasping for situations, sensations, categories of thoughts and opinions that are equally as illusory as they are also impermanent, empty and nonexistent in and of themselves.

Thus we have seen scholars like O'Leary remind us that the hoary and hallowed themes of theology have only provisional character. Likewise, Derrida and Dallmayr emphasize that neither a universal and total global political order nor entirely exclusive and insular ethnic or national enclaves are possible. Both extremes involve categories that attempt to freeze reality into separate and permanent boxes. What the work of Derrida also reminds us, however, is that the text, any text, also cannot be taken as some sort of absolute, separate category. Each text points beyond itself and leaves itself open to endless interpretations. It, like any other thing, is the result of a myriad of different influences and it will be read according to the influences and presuppositions of its reader. In this way the meaning of the text is in constant fluctuation. It cannot be said to have a fixed absolutist meaning, the sole and true will of its author, nor does it have no meaning

in a nihilist sense. Each text is open, ever-changing, and without ground. Like Indra's Net, it exemplifies the middle way.

We might conclude, therefore, that by employing Tuck's eisegetical methodology it has been demonstrated that the comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Derrida have been motivated by recognition of and concern for a middle way. A middle way reading of these text themselves, however, would admit that each can be interpreted in innumerable ways including absolutist and nihilist readings. To take one more look at Indra's Net, it should be stressed, that the Net does not provide its own ground – emptiness is itself empty. Like the text it does not exist as a conceivable whole but as something that extends ever outward and inward in all directions. In Derrida's terms it embodies the *aporia* as it is never completed or resolved. It always reaches out in openness and acceptance to the Other. The middle way could be characterized, therefore, as a view that is open to all views but accepts none as central dogma. This seems to be the lesson of both Nāgārjuna and Derrida, or at least the lesson of those who have been inspired by both. It is the lesson of the middle way.

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