An Indirect Unity:
Merleau-Ponty and Nāgārjuna on
the Human and the Non-human

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Abstract

The nature of the non-human assumes an understanding of the nature of the human, which we may claim, having our experience as from within this latter realm, but this leaves the operant term, *nature*, at a distance. This essay will investigate this problem through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's musings on human being and nature, and will compare these with Nāgārjuna's *Mulamadhyamikakārikā* (*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*), particularly drawing upon the experiential notion of *pratītya-samutpāda* (relational origination). The comparative approach herein will explain aspects of the Merleau-Pontyean ideas about *Gestalt*, reversibility and wild-being, and Nāgārjuna's treatment of the Buddhist tetralemma, *nirvāṇa* and *śūnyatā*, ranging them against each other, counter-pointing similarities and differences, and then finally demonstrating that through their shared perspectives there exists, what Merleau-Ponty calls, an *indirect unity* between these philosophers.

I. Introduction

The nature of the non-human assumes an understanding of the nature of the human, which we may claim, having our experience as from within this latter realm, but this leaves the operant term, *nature*, at a distance.[1] This paper will investigate the Western voice of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and some of his musings on human being and nature, and will compare these with the ancient Indian voice of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*), drawing upon the experiential notion of *pratītya-samutpāda* (co-dependent or relational origination).[2] This comparative approach will explain some of the key ideas of Merleau-Ponty and Nāgārjuna, ranging them against each other, counter-pointing similarities and differences, and then finally demonstrating that through their shared perspectives there exists, what Merleau-Ponty calls, an *indirect unity* between these philosophers.[3]

Intercultural or comparative philosophy is a broad project. While there is ample literature to support (and contest) the claim that comparative philosophy is justified, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, in his provocative article describes this project thus:

> Philosophy, by comparing different philosophies to each other, does not become a "comparative science of philosophy," but *is* philosophy. Comparative philosophy is identified by an inner self-contradiction: on the one hand, philosophy, like literature and art, is part of a cultural experience that cannot be fully materialized because it is an intimate process. In principle, such intimate processes cannot be "compared" (there is, e.g., no "comparative art"). On the other hand, philosophy is itself one of those materializing disciplines that attempt to transform culture, art, religion, et cetera into something that can be "grasped" through concepts, ideas, and notions and—finally—be compared.[4]

Merleau-Ponty also had a sense of this.[5] He claimed that "there is not *a* philosophy which contains all philosophies; philosophy as a whole is at certain moments in each philosophy…philosophy's center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere."[6] The universe of discourse that is philosophy is not limited to a single tradition, but rather the practice of comparison within and across traditions *is* philosophy, for it is a human-cultural, i.e., universal practice. Thus when Merleau-Ponty looked beyond the Western tradition, he recognized that "each time we shall have to learn anew to bridge the gap between ourselves and the past, between ourselves and the Orient, and…to find an *indirect unity*"[7] that binds and separates

cultures, institutions, and individuals. This paper thus seeks to bridge that gap with a comparative dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and Nāgārjuna on their views of the human and the non-human.

II. *Gestalt* **and Reversibility**

The initial points of contact between Merleau-Ponty and Nāgārjuna arise in their critiques of essentialist and substantialist thinking. For the former, as is evident throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the critique is levelled at the objective attitude.[8] This mode of thinking is common to both the rationalist (*qua* intellectualist) and empiricist traditions. The objective attitude is a reductive[9] perspective comparable to science, which is but a second order expression,[10] an "excursion into the realm of dogmatic common sense."[11] Objective or "analytic reflection starts from our experience of the world and goes back to the subject as to a condition of possibility distinct from that experience, revealing the all-embracing synthesis as that without which there would be no world."[12] Once this "transcendental condition" of subject-world relation is coupled with linguistic expressivity (though it does not essentially understand that "what is proper to expression is to never be more than approximate"[13]), the resultant expressions objectify entities; things in the world are reified, treated as substances whereby they are said or assumed to exist unto themselves, i.e., exist as separate beings. This is similar to our childhood lessons about object permanence, which is an understanding that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, heard, or touched, i.e., when they are not directly perceived. Merleau-Ponty's critique of the objective attitude uses two themes that resound throughout his entire corpus: *Gestalt* theory and temporality. As will be shown, Nāgārjuna's critique of this same objectifying practice echoes that of Merleau-Ponty.

Gestalt psychology, according to Merleau-Ponty, never quite realized the full philosophical, especially ontological implications for its theorizing—it tended to fall back into the objective attitude. In a *Gestalt*, all objects appear in a context; they are fore-grounded against a background as figures in a horizon. Figures and horizons are conditionally related to each other, and hence of each, one can say that it is what it is by what it is not (to speak Hegelian). Secondly, objects and world are embedded in reciprocal or reversible relations that only disclose themselves over the course of time, yet such disclosures are never totalizable: "reversibility [is] always imminent and never realized in fact,"[14] for when reversibility seems immanent, the obverse shifts our position, our focus/attention changes, and the *desired*[15] (safe) position of authority/objectivity cannot be attained.

Merleau-Ponty develops this experiential notion of reversibility via his phenomenological interrogations of kinaesthetic embodied perceptual experience. He recognizes that immanent appearances are intimately intertwined with transcendent absences, visibility and invisibility contextualize each other, and neither are presented transparently or given absolutely. The objective attitude *forgets* this insight and judges objects in a regulatively silent and still manner: hence, substantialist and essentialist thinking creeps in and attempts to freeze experience, relegating it to mere presence for a subject, who also is reified as (absolutely) existent. In order to be complete, this critique must be reflexively applied to the perceiving subject, the lived-body that is the person. Persons are continually instituting beings in regard to themselves (temporally in terms of histories and perceptual experiences, and existentially as beings-unto-death), as well as in relation to others (by way of intersubjectivity (sociality and community), linguisticality, and through embodiment as beings-in-the-world). Differing from Berkeley's claim that "to be is to be perceived,"[16] Merleau-Ponty holds that to perceive, one must also be perceivable. That with which we perceive, the sensori-motor capabilities of the lived-body, entails that the perceiver is also simultaneously perceptible to another perceiver. Incarnation calls to and hears other incarnations, perceives and is perceived by others. The subject as relationally incarnated is not simply decentred via reversibility (rendered in non-substantialist terms), but must and can only be rightly construed as an *artefact*[17] or cultural creation, *not* an inherently existent monad absolutely distant and distinct from the world, *yet* in intimate relation to it. This latter dualism is a product of the objective attitude, but can be corrected through Merleau-Ponty's reflexive use of reversibility.

III. The Tetralemma and Enlightenment

Nāgārjuna's philosophical approach in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* parallels Merleau-Ponty's insights, but there is a distinctive difference: Nāgārjuna's soteriological intentions. Nāgārjuna's *madhyamaka* Buddhism contributed to the development of the Mahāyāna tradition and our understanding of the four-fold noble truth about *duhkha* (suffering): there is universal suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path out of suffering. Suffering is caused by both desire and the attachments to said desires and the objects of these desires. Suffering via attachment can take many forms—as generally identified with the experiences of both the hedonists (those who reify and grasp after supposed existents) and nihilists (those who wish to let go of and abnegate supposed

existents). By following the *Dharma* (the Teachings, Doctrines, or Truth of the Buddha), one can find release or liberation (*mokṣa*) from suffering. This is the way to escape the wheel of life-death that is *saṃsāra* and enter enlightenment or *nirvāṇa*. This last idea is quite alien for Merleau-Ponty's philosophy; this despite the fact that he refers to religious metaphors, particularly Catholic ideas, throughout his corpus. To follow the path to *nirvāṇa*, the practitioner must acquire not merely a deep understanding of suffering and *śūnyatā* (emptiness), but must also make these the "center" of his/her "style of being" (to use Merleau-Ponty's phrase).[18] Nāgārjuna's explication of the four noble truths in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, takes the Buddha's radical insight of *anātman* (non-self) and crystallizes relational origination into a philosophical understanding of *śūnyatā*. The Buddha understood that each individual (person, or as we see extended by Nāgārjuna, entity) is a constituted being. Humans are comprised of the *pañca-skandha*s: *rūpa, vedanā, saṃjñā, saṃskāra*, and *vijñāṇa*; respectively, material form, feeling, awareness, mental formations and consciousness. Hence, no person is a singular substantial entity (*ātman*, soul, or monad). The truth of existence is non-self-existence (*nihsvabhāva*). Since each human, indeed each entity is a construct and no element in that construct can be what it is without the other elements, and the whole configuration is likewise dependently originated, then each entity must merely be said to exist in a relational and conventional sense; however, in an enlightened understanding, each supposed entity is experienced as empty of inherent self-existence,[19] which captures the meaning of *anātman* (non-self). These are the two kinds of truths available to the madhyamakan: the conventional worldly truths (*saṃvṛti-satya*) of *saṃsāra* that treat each entity as existent, and the enlightened truths (*paramārtha-satya*) of *nirvāṇa* that hold that there never were self-existent beings, for all are empty. Nagarjuna even asserts, "No Dharma was taught by the Buddha, At any time, in any place, to any person;"[20] and hence, Merleau-Ponty's words in the *Phenomenology of Perception* are quite *apropos*: "no one is saved and no one is totally lost."[21] This dovetails with the *bodhisattva*'s (enlightened-being's) perspective on *anātman*, for no one is saved or lost because there is no *one* with which to begin. Nāgārjuna's argument for these (non-) positions is succinctly encapsulated in the *catuṣkoṭi* or four-tiered logic of the Buddhist tetralemma.

Nāgārjuna's tetralemma, deployed throughout the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* in his *reduction ad absurdum* or *prasanga* critiques, and Merleau-Ponty's use of *Gestalt* notions, closely match each other in tone and implication. Nāgārjuna's critiques are aimed at his opponents, who explicitly or implicitly adopt substantialist perspectives

on mundane and/or "enlightened" experience. He aims to undercut the source of suffering stemming from his opponents' views (*dṛṣṭhi*) and support his soteriological aims, as well he actually uses phenomenological and relational descriptions for these purposes. Importantly, Nagarjuna will apply the tetralemma to itself as an auto-corrective. The tetralemma can be summed up thusly: 1) x is A; 2) x is not A; 3) x is both A and not A (violation of the law of non-contradiction); and 4) x is neither A nor not A (violation of the law of excluded middle); "x" serves here as a linguistic place holder for the subject under discussion (e.g., entity, quality, phenomena, or even emptiness). Nāgārjuna uses the four propositions in a positive[22] and a negative manner (wherein each proposition is negated[23]); for example, in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXII.11 he writes: "Nothing could be asserted to be *śūnya, aśūnya*, both *śūnya* and *aśūnya*, and neither *śūnya* nor *aśūnya*. They are asserted only for the purpose of provisional understanding" (i.e., *saṃvṛti-satya*). The first three propositions are indicative of the conventional truth(s) available to us. To use a psychological example, consider your own person: 1) a person is who they are as evidenced by first-person experiences; 2) but a person is who they are by the roles they play in life—son, daughter, mother, father, friend, co-worker, boss, etc., that is, a person is defined by non-first-person experiences, but without whom the person could not be who they are; 3) thus at mundane and basic phenomenological level, a person is both first-person experiences and non-first-person experiences (by others); and 4) a person is neither first-person experiences nor non-first-person experiences (by others), for there is no "person" that exists independently of these relations. If these relations were not, the person would not be the person they are purported to be. The fourth proposition points beyond the provisional understanding provided by the tetralemma.

In the Buddhist notion of *pratītya-samutpāda*, relationality is ubiquitous. There is for the self or any other entity no escaping the mutuality of dependence in *saṃsāra*, which from the enlightened perspective sees the emptiness of relationality to be the truth of *anātman* and *śūnyatā*. Nāgārjuna extends this insight in two related ways: firstly, just as the truth of the existence of the person is *anātman*, the same can be said of the truth of the existence of any (so-called) entity insofar that it is ultimately empty of self-existence (which does not entail that things are non-existent, just that nothing has ultimate or absolute existence to be what it is in and through itself); and secondly, even the enlightened realm/ perspective is relational: "*Saṃsāra* (i.e., the empirical life-death cycle) is nothing essentially different from *nirvāṇa*. *Nirvāṇa* is nothing essentially different from *saṃsāra*. // The limits (i.e., realm) of *nirvāṇa* are the limits

of *saṃsāra*. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever."[24]   *Saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa* and *nirvāṇa* is *saṃsāra*, and thus the experiential notion of *śūnyatā* is taken to be the truth of existence.

IV. Human Being

Merleau-Ponty does not accept or employ notions of enlightenment, yet he uses *Gestalt* thinking in a manner similar to Nāgārjuna's tetralemma. Each object is conditioned by its context; the horizon in which it appears remains in the background like the object's non-apparent aspects. Hence, the object is as it appears and is this appearance by that which is withheld in absence (as stated in the tetralemma's first and second propositions), that is, relationality is also ubiquitous in Merleau-Ponty's thinking. Objects are then given phenomenologically as presence and absence; the two are mutually intertwined in reversibility for Merleau-Ponty (and thus we have the third proposition of the tetralemma[25]). These inter-relations are also temporally complex, for change is inherent to their presencing and absencing. Objects are revealed and concealed in the never ending processes of reversibility, wherein no ultimate or final position (being present or absent) is completely and absolutely reached. Therefore, just as Nāgārjuna's philosophical treatment of composition necessitates a denial of inherent self-existence, that is, this conclusion is entailed by his rejection of substantialist or essentialist thinking, so too do we find Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology eschewing absolutist or determinate judgments about ultimate essences or natures. Merleau-Ponty, however, was not willing to declare a path to enlightenment, but as can be seen, his indirect ontology has a style quite similar to Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā*.

   With this shared style of ontology, Merleau-Ponty's as *indirect*[26] and Nāgārjuna's as *negative*,[27] we can turn to *nature*, not in terms of some kind of question, but rather in how it is to be conceived: "clearing up the connection between Nature and persons [humanity] involves a fundamental difficulty."[28] Nominally, such a conception assumes a particular definition of human beings in contradistinction to nature. Approaches that hold humans as beings-in-the-world to be really ensconced as beings-in-the-world-*of-nature* either gloss over the distinction, subsuming humanity into nature, or gather humanity into a corner of nature and block it off, thus attempting to access an "unfiltered" nature, to hear the unsullied call of the *wild*. Merleau-Ponty, in his provocative essay on Husserl, "The Philosopher and His Shadow," says of the human mind that "mind without Nature can be thought about and Nature without mind cannot. But perhaps we do not have to think about the world and ourselves in terms of the bifurcation

of Nature and mind [that is, the human]."[29] None of these bifurcating versions are tenable, not simply because nature has not been adequately conceived (which is the case), but rather because humanity itself has not been adequately conceived. Hence, to address the non-human is deeply problematic for that from which the address is made remains opaque and cacophonous. The human as an idea remains problematic. To this we can now turn.

Given the above descriptions of Merleau-Ponty's *Gestalt* theorizing and Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā*, any essentialist reading of humanity must be rejected. According to Merleau-Ponty, "man [human being] is a *historical idea* and not a natural species. In other words, there is in human existence no unconditional possession, and yet no fortuitous attribute."[30] Humankind has no essential characteristics beyond certain contingencies sedimented around its own conceptualizations. In rejecting any substantialist reading of human being, he writes, "the psychophysiological equipment leaves a great variety of possibilities open, and there is no more here than in the realm of instinct a human nature finally and immutably given."[31] Years later, he re-iterates,

> It is true that the totality of beings known by the name of men and defined by the commonly known physical characteristics also have in common a natural light or opening to being which makes cultural acquisitions communicable to all men and to them alone. But this lightning flash we find in every glance called human is just as visible in the most cruel forms of sadism as it is in Italian painting. It is precisely this flash which makes everything possible on man's part, and right up to the end. Man is absolutely distinct from animal species, but precisely in the respect that he has no original equipment and is the place of contingency, which sometimes takes the form of a kind of miracle…and sometimes the form of an unintentional adversity.[32]

Merleau-Ponty explains that both good (e.g., miracles) and evil (adversity) events are contingent, marked by their histories and how they are judged.[33] On the one hand, humanity is defined by its physical attributes (he states, in Aristotelian fashion, "I am that animal of perceptions and movements called a body"[34]), but on the other hand, humanity is a species of culture, not simply one that institutes culture, but also an institution of that culture.

As with Merleau-Ponty, the human for Nāgārjuna cannot be simply reduced to his/her physical characteristics, for "self-nature [*svabhāva*], indeed, never remains fixed."[35] This would be tantamount to claiming that

the human entity is nothing other than *rūpa*. Even if one were to relegate the mental *skandhas* to materialist explanations, it would not suffice. This simplified version of the human, *qua* a purely naturalized being, would not be able to account for the insights of the noble truths, that is, suffering would be explained away, which is akin to squaring a circle. Suffering is a product and producer of *karma* (from $\sqrt{kr}$ (to make, to do, to create)), which refers not to a mere law of moral economy, but to a more general understanding of the temporality of suffering. Attachment and desire are creatures of time: they hold onto and seek after what is not given, attempting to replace absence with presence under the misconstrual that this replacement will suffice to maintain effervescent satisfaction or permanently fulfill the fleeting needs of the moment. In striving for and pining after, the sufferer is concerned with the past that is no more and the future that is not yet, both absences which the sufferer attempts to make present. Learning to see this suffering as the clinging after that which has no enduring being in order to satiate a being that is also not eternal is one of the steps to attaining *nirvāṇa*. The "end" of enlightenment is not a foregone conclusion for any person—there is no nirvanic *telos* for Nāgārjuna. However, *nirvāṇa* is an open possibility for each.

How does this temporality of karmic action grant an insight into human being as Merleau-Ponty describes? For Nāgārjuna, the sufferer is through and through dynamical. At the conventional level, the sufferer is subject to transmigration, that is, one's karmic effects pass beyond the bounds of particular actions, though this is off-set by the enlightened view that the sufferer is ultimately empty of self-existence. History, then, would be the karmic confluences and contingencies that are relationally, not absolutely, bound together. This would accord with Merleau-Ponty's later views, for there is no present destiny to which we are all doomed. [36] There is no essentialist truth to history's ends, there are only hints and perspectives that show it is (always) on its way. This openness is intrinsic to the *bodhisattva* declaration, acknowledged by Nāgārjuna, that though they seek enlightenment, they vow to refrain from completely entering *nirvāṇa* until, out of their compassion for the world, they have liberated all sufferers. [37]

Just as universal suffering is understood by the compassionate *bodhisattvas*, so too is the pervasive and pernicious role of the subject assessed by Merleau-Ponty. This imposes a task for our understanding of the human and non-human vis-à-vis nature. Supposedly, Merleau-Ponty's *l'etre sauvage* is that *brute* or *wild being* that appears uncultured or uncultivated. [38] But how is this to be taken—especially given a number of his problematic utterances. For example, he asks, "whether, and in what

sense, what is *not nature* forms a 'world,' and first what a 'world' is, and finally, if world there is, what can be the relations between the visible world and the invisible world," between the sensible and the sentient?[39] Answers must contend with certain Berkeleyian insights, because philosophical inquiry "is the set of questions wherein he who questions is himself implicated by the question."[40] This reflexive movement of the questioning is a consequence of reversibility—no position, whether absolute objectivity or complete subjectivity, can be determinately given or attained. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that Berkeley would say,

> even an unexplored desert has at least one person to observe it, namely myself when I think of it, that is, when I perceive it in purely mental experience. The thing [or object] is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity.[41]

Problematically, it follows that experience "is not the measure of all imaginable being in itself and that it is nonetheless co-extensive with all being of which we can form a notion."[42] Across the landscapes of Merleau-Ponty's *l'etre sauvage*, every part of being is invested with humanity by its questioning, is acculturated into this historical idea that always remains unfinished, a note that never quite trails into utter silence.[43] Nature itself is not merely marked by temporality *qua* evolution, but human being as history. "The openness upon a *natural and historical world* is not an illusion and is not an a priori; it is our involvement with Being."[44] This ought to be read whereby "natural and historical" were dependently conjoined in describing the same world, for they are not separable. Merleau-Ponty's *Nature, Course Notes from the College de France* interrogates this in terms of the complicated and complicating reversibility between *natura naturans* ("nature naturing") and *natura naturata* ("nature natured"),[45] activity and passivity, presence and absence, *physis* and *logos*, and the other binaries at work in philosophy. We can add to this list the binary components of the human and the non-human.

V.   Wild Being

Nāgārjuna uses the tetralemma to surmount these binaries. From the enlightened perspective, pointed to by the fourth tier of the tetralemma, experience is seen aright by rejecting the extremes. Phenomena are neither

active nor passive, for either description is always incomplete, proximal, or inadequate. But is this (type of) insight available in Merleau-Ponty's corpus whose work is not soteriological?[46] Consider what he says of humanity: it is partially defined in an empirical sense (physical characteristics), but also in an idealistic manner (historically constituted). Similarly, the same can be said of nature, that it too is just as much empirical as it is ideal. In one of his late working notes from 1960, just before he passed away, Merleau-Ponty wrote, "Moreover the distinction between the two planes (natural and cultural [i.e., historical]) is abstract: everything is cultural in us (our *Lebenswelt* is 'subjective') (our perception is cultural-historical) and everything is natural in us (even the cultural rests on the polymorphism of the wild Being)."[47] These are examples of the third proposition in Nāgārjuna's tetralemma.[48] Merleau-Ponty's response to these *aporias* attempts to avoid and transcend these dilemmas. In terms of humanity, both the individual and the community are constituted from a *pre-personal* or *anonymous life*, which takes part in what he calls "corporeality in general," for "at this level there is neither individuation nor numerical distinction."[49] The ambiguous basis of human being is the non-human, but the non-human shares in that same corporeality in general, which opens the possibilities of *attunement* to the other, not simply as the ethical Other (*qua* Levinas), but the non-human Other. In his radio lectures compiled and translated as *The World of Perception*, given after the publication of *Phenomenology of Perception*, he states, "…we are not alone in this transfigured [dynamic] world. In fact, this world is not just open to other human beings but also *open to animals*… who dwell in it after their own fashion; they too coexist in this world."[50] Just as the human is intimately related to the animal, the animal exhibits a relationality to the world that is quite "human": animals too behave with(in) and engage the world, and hence have their own interiority:

> …in spite of what mechanistic biology might suggest, the world we live in is not made up only of things and space: some of these parcels of matter, which we call living beings, proceed to trace in their environment, by the way they act or behave, their very own version of things. We will only see this if we lend our attention to the spectacle of the animal world, if we are prepared to live alongside the world of animals instead of rashly denying it any kind of *interiority*.[51]

Animal interiority partakes of that anonymous life of corporeal generality by which it has versions of things. Nature is not merely the realm of *animalia* (human and non-human living beings), for there is the rest of so-called materiality. The non-human refers not merely to animals, for the anonymous generality that under-girds human being also subtends

animals; the non-human is below life. Merleau-Ponty says:

> One cannot…conceive any perceived thing without someone to perceive it. But the fact remains that the thing presents itself to the person who perceives it as a thing in itself, and thus poses the problem of a genuine *in-itself-for-us*. Ordinarily we do not notice this because our perception, in the context of our everyday concerns, alights on things sufficiently attentively to discover in them their familiar presence, *but not sufficiently so to disclose the non-human element which lies hidden in them*.[52]

We are perceptually open to a world that is perceptually open to us.[53] The *logos* of the world has its own intrinsic[54] or autochthonous organization, its own self structuring pre-objective being. This is that *wild being* whose undertones are "behind or beneath the cleavages of our acquired culture."[55] Yet there is a praxis that separates the human from the animal, for "only a human being is capable of…a vision, which penetrates right to the root of things beneath the imposed order of humanity. All indications are that animals cannot *look at* things, cannot penetrate them in expectation of nothing but the truth."[56] While the human and animal are perceptually open to the shared world of nature, humanity is condemned to meanings hidden in appearances, instituting the presencing absences of the hidden non-human. With the later Merleau-Ponty, we can say the human and animal exhibit "that cohesion which cannot be denied them since they are all differences, extreme divergencies of one same something,"[57] the non-human.

In a Mahāyāna text that by centuries post-dates Nāgārjuna, there is a similar recognition that human beings and animals engage and interrogate the same world, and thus can suffer:

> Animals too are seen undergoing multifarious forms of suffering by way of their mutual malice, slaughter and mutilation. And some (domesticated animals), being tormented from all sides and completely against their will, have their bodies subjugated by nose-piercing, beating, binding and so on. They are completely worn down, their bodies broken by carrying unbearably heavy burdens. Similarly, those harmless ones dwelling in the wilderness are exterminated, having been purposefully hunted down wherever they might be. And as they forever remain thus, fleeing hither and thither with minds agitated by fear, their suffering is clearly seen to be unlimited.[58]

Living beings share the similarity of suffering and aspire for freedom (*mokṣa*) from this state.[59] As Emerson states, "nature, as we know her, is no saint."[60] But would Nāgārjuna agree with this later Mahayana understanding, and extend compassion to the non-human? This answer can only be affirmative. After all he knows, "one who rightly discerns relational origination will, indeed, rightly discern universal suffering, its origination, its extinction, and the way to enlightenment."[61] Buddhist "great compassion" is not bounded; it applies to corporeality in general or *wild being*. Thus the Buddhist *Dharma*, teaching/doctrine and the elements of existence, are relationally originated, or as Merleau-Ponty would say, culture and nature are subject to reversibility.

VI. Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty's claim that there is an indirect unity shared by philosophies across traditions, ages and geographies, is amply demonstrated in his work. Nāgārjuna's thought connects, crosses, and yet diverges from Merleau-Ponty's ideas. Their anti-substantialist approaches appeal to perceptual and experiential relationality; as well Merleau-Ponty's *Gestalt* thinking and Nāgārjuna's tetralemma have structural similarities. Despite their different frames of reference, they both reject a human *essence*. Nāgārjuna's soteriological intentions are not matched by Merleau-Ponty, who does not consider the universality of suffering (adversity) in the same way, nor does he subscribe to the possibility of enlightenment. However, both recognize deep similarities shared by humans and animals as beings engaged with the world. Beyond this mutuality, there is that which both subtends and transcends the givenness of nature, this is named *śūnyatā* by Nāgārjuna and *wild being* by Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty, in a number of his late works attempts to develop, via distinction, the notion of *vertical* from mere *lateral* being. Lateral being is characterized as a "side-to-side" causality.[62] This is the world understood as subject to linear causality, for example naturalisms based on the objective attitude. Vertical being is marked by an impossible immanence, a givenness that is always withheld, but not as a transcendence *par excellence*. This is the horizon in which everything arises, but which itself never arises, just as for Nāgārjuna everything is empty, including emptiness. Merleau-Ponty describes verticality as "the union of the incompossibles."[63] It is as if Merleau-Ponty's use of "being" in these contexts ought to be crossed out and erased, for laterality and verticality are sufficient.

The indirect unity, then, between Merleau-Ponty and Nāgārjuna is necessarily interpretive, for the conventional truths of lateral

naturalisms intertwine and diverge from the enlightened truths of vertical incompossibles. Phenomenological horizons extend laterally across the human and non-human considered in their objective determinations (a prose of the world), and in a reflective sense, their vertical horizons rise to heights and descend into depths that are not merely non-human, but also are not non-human. To express that operant term – nature –of the human or the non-human, can only then be done with metaphors. Hence, in Merleau-Ponty's vernacular, there are many ways of praising the world via expression (e.g., singing the music of being, or dancing along with the rhythmic callings of the *wild*), but the highest praise requires living it.[64] Without a doubt, Nāgārjuna would be mindful of such a practice.

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NOTES

1 In a different context, Merleau-Ponty makes the following pertinent point: "It would mean forgetting that the sensible order is *being at a distance*—the fulgurating attestation here and now to an inexhaustible richness—and that things are only half-opened before us, unveiled and hidden" (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 167). A different perspective on this could take up Merleau-Ponty's assertions about how *depth* ought to be considered the "first dimension" or a "global locality"; see *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 180.

2 Nāgārjuna, *A Translation of Nagarjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay,* trans. Kenneth K. Inada (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993).

3 Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 133.

4 Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "Ethnophilosophy, Comparative Philosophy, Pragmatism: Toward a Philosophy of Ethnoscapes," *Philosophy East & West* 56, no. 1, (2006): 153–154.

5 "Merleau-Ponty's Hermeneutics of Comparative Philosophy Revisited," *Phenomenological Inquiry: A Review of Philosophical Ideas and Trends* 31, (2007): 90-110.

6 Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 128.

7 Ibid., 133.

8 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas, General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, (New York: Collier Books, 1962), Vol. 1, Section 30, "The General Thesis of the Natural Standpoint"; also cited in *Phenomenology, The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation*, Joseph J. Kockelmans ed., (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 74.

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), xv.

10 Ibid., viii.

11 Ibid., xi.

12 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

13 "Man and Adversity" in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Signs*, 233.

14 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 147.

15 Ibid., 144. The *desire* for formulating such objective or absolute statements regarding the world is a specific concern of Nāgārjuna's, particularly in his attacks on the Sarvastivadins ("all exists school") and the Pudgalavadins ("the self exists school").

16 George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge, Three Dialogues*, (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[17] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 180.

[18] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 69; Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 139. See also his *Institution and Passivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 74-75.

[19] To follow Tzong kha ba via J. Garfield's idiom; see Garfield, Jay L., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, Nāgārjuna's* Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 89.

[20] Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Jay L. Garfield, translator), chapter XXV, verse 24, 334.

[21] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 171. This is taken out of context as Merleau-Ponty's chapter focus herein is "The Body in Its Sexual Being."

[22] Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XVIII.8 gives a positive version of the tetralemma: "Everything is suchness (*tathyam*), not suchness, both suchness and not suchness, and neither suchness nor not suchness. This is the Buddha's teaching." Jay Garfield, seemingly in contrast to Inada's view of this passage, describes this as "the positive tetralemma regarding existence." His translation reads, "Everything is real and is not real, Both real and not real, Neither real nor not real. This is the Lord Buddha's teaching" (*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, Nāgārjuna's* Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 250).

[23] Jay Garfield's translation of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXII.11 is as follows: " 'Empty' should not be asserted. 'Nonempty' should not be asserted. Neither both nor neither should be asserted. They are only used nominally." He then comments, "This *negative tetralemma* [emphasis added] is a crucial verse for understanding the relation between discourse on the conventional level and the understanding of emptiness or the ultimate truth" (*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, Nāgārjuna's* Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, 280).

[24] Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXV.19–20.

[25] See also Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* 264, wherein Merleau-Ponty writes in a late working note of 1960: "start from this: there is not identity, nor non-identity, or non-coincidence, there is inside and outside turning about one another—My 'central' nothingness is like the point of the stroboscopic spiral, which is *who knows where*, which is 'nobody.'" He could very well have written that it is "non-self" (i.e., *anātman*).

[26] Ibid., 179.

[27] Berman, Michael, "Nāgārjuna's Negative Ontology," *Journal of Indian Philosophy and Religion* 12 (2007): 115–146.

[28] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 178.

[29] Ibid., 162.

[30] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 170. See also Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 71: "…the healthy, civilized, adult human being strives for…coherence [in their life and behaviour]. Yet the crucial point here is that he does not *attain* this coherence: it remains an idea, or limit, which he never actually manages to reach." And later, in his introduction to *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty writes, "the complete man, the man who does not dream, who can die well because he lives well, and who can love his life because he envisages his death is, like the myth of the Androgynes, the symbol of what we *lack*" (*Signs,* 34, emphasis added).

[31] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 189.

[32] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 239–240. See also *Institution and Passivity*, 18-19.

[33] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 239.

[34] Ibid., 167.

[35] Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXIV.26.

[36] As Merleau-Ponty refined and honed his political thought about Marxism, he came to understand it as a useful and insightful tool for interrogating history, but it would be a mistake to reify this structural lens into an absolute edifice upon which modernity and humanity as such would be draped. We can trace this trajectory of his thinking from *Humanism and Terror* (USA: Beacon Press, 1969) to *The Adventures of the Dialectic* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), as well as his later works.

[37] Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXVIII.12 and XXIV.8, and *Buddhist Wisdom: The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra,* trans. Edward Conze (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958). See also Martin Adam's translation of a number of important passages from a later Mahāyāna text: "and when compassion is developed to the point where it is equally engaged towards *all beings* as dear as suffering children, carrying its own distinct flavour in the form of wishing to rescue (them) from suffering, it is then that it is perfected and obtains the designation 'great compassion' [*mahākārūñña*]" (108); based on "a translation of a small section of the first *Bhāvanākramaḥ* (The Process of Meditation; Tib., *bsgom pa'i rim pa*), a well-known Mahāyāna meditation manual written by Kamalaśīla (740-795 CE)" in *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* no. 4 (2008), 105.

[38] Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 16, n6.

[39] Ibid., 27, emphasis added.

[40] Ibid., 27; see also ibid., 90.

[41] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 320.

[42] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 93. See also Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xvi–xvii: "the self-evidence of perception is not adequate thought or apodeictic self-evidence. The world is not what I think, but what I live

through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible. 'There is a world,' or rather: 'There is the world;' I can never completely account for this ever-reiterated assertion in my life."

[43] This is similar to the Cosmic Microwave Background radiation left over after the Big Bang (the singularity that was the universe's beginning).

[44] Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible,* 85, emphasis added.

[45] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 9: "…nature is made double, as *naturans* and as *naturata…Meaning finds its refuge in the naturans*; *naturata* becomes product, pure exteriority."

[46] In the midst of *The Visible and the Invisible's* examination of the philosophy of reflection, Merleau-Ponty proposes a line of inquiry that would certainly open the possibility for a *middle way*: "it is a question of reconsidering the interdependent notions of the active and the passive in such a way that they no longer place us before the antinomy of a philosophy that accounts for being and the truth, but does not take the world into account, and a philosophy that takes the world into account, but uproots us from being and the truth" (43).

[47] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 252; I thank my colleague Prof. Rajiv Kaushik for reminding me about this citation. In *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), Merleau-Ponty cites Cezanne, writing that, "nature is on the inside" (164) of humanity, but we could also state in this context that "humanity is on the inside" of nature, not just as a being-in-the-world, but also as the core constitutor of nature *qua* historical idea and institutor *qua* natality or creativity.

[48] This assumes empiricism and idealism (or intellectualism) are taken to be mutually exclusive categories; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 26.

[49] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* 84, as to corporeality in general: "…our life has, in the astronomical sense of the word, an atmosphere: it is constantly enshrouded by those mists we call the sensible world or history, the *one* of the corporeal life and the *one* of human life." And in Merleau-Ponty, *Signs,* 174: "it is only the haze of an anonymous life that separates us from being; and the barrier between us and others is impalpable. If there is a break, it is not between me and the other person; it is between a primordial generality we are intermingled in and the precise system, myself-the others. What 'precedes' intersubjective life cannot be numerically distinguished from it, precisely because at this level there is neither individuation nor numerical distinction." See also Merleau-Ponty's discussion about the "irrational roots of this life" in *The World of Perception*, 75.

[50] Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 70, emphasis added.

[51] Ibid., 75; emphasis added.

[52] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 322, emphasis added.

[53] Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, 167. See Merleau-Ponty's citing of the artist Paul Klée, "some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me."

[54] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 22.

[55] Ibid., 121.

[56] See Merleau-Ponty's "Cézanne's Doubt" in Galen A. Johnson's *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 67. The last claim in this quote is actually contradicted by the contemporary evidence we have regarding chimpanzees, apes, elephants, dolphins, octopi, and certain species of birds. The mammal species just mentioned are capable of self-consciousness insofar as recognizing themselves and their own specific body-parts in mirrors, just as humans learn to do. The latter species demonstrate tool use (like the mammal species mentioned), as well as abstract reasoning processes, e.g., octopi in problem solving, and parrots in performing mathematical addition.

[57] Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 84.

[58] Martin Adam, "Mahayana Buddhist Attitudes Towards Animals," *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, X, no. 4 (2008): 106–7.

[59] Ibid., 105.

[60] Emerson, *The Heart of Emerson's Essays*, 172.

[61] Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXIV.40; I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for rightly pointing out that Inada adds the adjectival term "universal" to the translation of *duḥkhaṃ* in this passage. While Inada's charitable translation captures the soteriological intentions of Nāgārjuna, it does give the sentence more force than its literal translation would have.

[62] Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 22: "a perceived world is in terms of its field laws and laws of intrinsic organization, and not—like the *object*—according to the exigencies of a 'side to side' causality."

[63] Ibid., 228.

[64] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 187–8.