Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna: Relational Social Ontology and the Ground of Ethics

Michael Berman

Through a comparative analysis of the key ontological notions in Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna, I develop a relational social ontology that is grounded in their respective implicit and explicit ethics. Both thinkers take heed of our being-in-the-world; this is evident in their views on intersubjective sociality and language. Recognizing the limitations in these views points us toward a greater understanding of the meaningfulness of our situated existences. In this vein, I propose a number of ideas to guide the work of comparative philosophy.

Existence in Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna

The analyses of embodiment and the intrinsic meaningfulness of existence by Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna share strong similarities. These analyses, however, are limited by their own means, that is, language. Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna address the problematics caused by linguistic behavior from within the context of an intersubjective relational social ontology. In a more positive sense, they also recognize that within intersubjectivity there manifests intrinsic moral and ethical actions that (implicitly) structure our societies (Berman, 2002).

Both philosophers concern themselves with the nature of existence. They emphasize the importance of experience and perception which are in and of the world. In other words, Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna rely on an existential analysis of our lives as situated beings in the phenomenal world. As situated entities we are open to experiencing the world in which we live and which in turn inhabits us. Their respective notions of reversibility and relational origination (pratitya-samutpada) describe the immediate mutual relations between us as situated beings and the experiential world.

Reversibility and relational origination indicate a kind of ontological paralleling. This paralleling is based upon their respect ontologies (indirect and negative).
Neither the *flesh*, nor *sunyata* posits *substantialist* views or doctrines in order to explain existential experience. Rather, they describe the world (that is, reality) in its essentially dynamic and interconnected processes of becoming. Existence for them is fundamentally temporal. However, Merleau-Ponty remains committed to an inherent abidingness within existence. This is the recalcitrance of phenomena. Yet, embedded within this view is an understanding of the fundamental lack of (a) substantial ground (*abgrund*) for experience. This is one of the many nuances of Merleau-Ponty’s metaphorical description of reality as *chiasm* or *abyss* (an open-ended criss-crossing of possibilities). The ambiguities of experience, according to his existential analysis, lend themselves to be understood in a manner, at least implicitly, that resembles Nagarjuna’s employment of *sunyata*. This is nowhere more evident than in Merleau-Ponty’s version of a relational social ontology. That is to say, Merleau-Ponty’s and Nagarjuna’s approach to *intersubjectivity* brings their individual ideas into close proximity. This is further evidenced in their critiques of language.

Both hold that language is essentially limited. Beyond the pragmatic and arbitrary aspects of different linguistic meanings, the meaningfulness of the world always eludes the attempts by language to state the world’s meanings in a manner that would exhaust all of its relations. In other words, *experience actively overflows the objectifications of language*; theory may indicate certain structures of experience, but it never fully accounts for it. By recognizing these limitations of language, Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna incorporate a necessary auto-critical component into their philosophies. This is Merleau-Ponty’s *hyper-dialectic*; Nagarjuna’s use of the *tetralemma*, in certain respects, parallels this function, though it is mainly used in explaining (away) ontological claims via *prasanga* or *reductio ad absurdum* arguments.

The meaningfulness of existence is encapsulated by the doctrines of Merleau-Ponty’s *autochthonous organization* and Nagarjuna’s understanding of the *Dharma*. These doctrines state that through experience we can identify dynamically arisen significances which are not the sole product of a constituting consciousness (such as in Kant or Husserl). Under the auspices of intersubjectivity, intrinsically meaningful existence is reflected in the essentially interconnected behaviors of human beings *qua* their sociality. In this sense, the relational social ontology of human beings manifests grounds for moral and ethical characteristics. These characteristics are causal, though not in a necessary or sufficient *capacity*, for they are momentary (and non-teleological) aspects of social organization. These characteristics cut across social structures in a lateral fashion. The realization of this is the attainment of an open and ethical point of view with respect to the societal situatedness of each individual, an understanding of the ethical *responsibility* each has for the Other.

**Experience and Perception are in and of the World**

Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna reject transcendental or metaphysical explanations of the subject or self. Neither one holds that we experience an actual *singular* entity like the *cogito* or *atman*. These are, in part, illusory products of language: for Nagarjuna, there are other contributing factors which arise out of the relational (*pratitya*)
interactions of the Wheel of Life–Death, our desires (trṣnas) and attachments (upadānas) in particular; for Merleau-Ponty, the transcendentals cogito is a misconstrual of the objectifications of individual embodiment. Neither thinker maintains that the mind–body bifurcation is absolute or existentially real; both see it as an artificial distinction.

The dichotomization of mind and body is a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of perception and experience. The philosophies of ‘reflection’, ‘the negative’ and ‘intuition’ (see Merlean-Ponty, 1968) all epitomize this dichotomy in their quests for the establishment of knowledge. Consequently, instead of grounding knowledge on existential experience, they tend to reify certain aspects of knowledge as unassailable, and maintain their explanations of reality from some absolutist perspective, that is, the world is totalized and surveyed via high altitude thinking (pensee du survol). Similarly, Nagarjuna critiques the unenlightened views of those who continue to suffer from attachments to and desires for the self. This suffering (duhkha) is exemplified by the Sautrantika insistence on the existential continuity of personality (pudgalavada), and the more philosophical, though no less misguided conceptions of dharmas (elements of existence) by the Sarvastivada. There is no mind or subject which constructs experience, rather the subject is a construct of experience (in an intersubjective or social context).

Experience is not constituted by some (metaphysical/eternal) entity who is placed up against and alongside the world. We do not view the world from the position of high altitude thinking; instead we are entities in and of the world. Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna accept the carnal situated nature of all entities. For the former, the lived-body’s situatedness within the sole world that is common to all other lived-bodies evidences its own incarnate nature. The latter’s adherence to the Wheel of Life–Death and the five aggregates (pancaskandha) is indicative of a similar view, though the metaphysics involved, that is, the experiential analysis by Nagarjuna, differs significantly from Merleau-Ponty’s more scientific and psychological understanding of experience. Yet, neither wishes to de-situate the experiencer outside of his/her experiences qua existence. They each employ a paradigmatic phenomenon to illustrate this very situatedness.

The paradigmatic phenomena of the double touch and anatman characterize their respective approaches to the experiencer. Both of these phenomena constantly decenter experience. Consequently, there is no substantial or inherently self-existing entity which can function as a ground or foundation for experience or the constitution thereof. In the case of Merleau-Ponty, the lived-body is sometimes misinterpreted as a universalizing subjective principle that reduces the world to its perceptual experiences. This is phenomenologically inaccurate, for the interrogation of our perceptual faith shows that we constantly examine the world from our situatedness as corporeal entities. This very situatedness is never absolute, there are no apodeictic viewpoints from which to survey from above the world of experience. Thus, perception is always perspectival and epistemically confluent; it can never be (perfectly) identical with the experiences of other corporeal perceivers. The lived-body is never absolute, and therefore, it cannot be a means of solipsistically reducing the world to an individual’s perceptual experiences.
Anatman as an experiential state also constantly decenters the supposed core of the self or soul. There is no absolutely or inherently self-existent entity which constitutes experience for Nagarjuna. Experience is essentially the phenomenal depicting of the motions of the Wheel of Life–Death. The impermanent momentariness of the Wheel’s spokes (prataya) is the relational origination of the self (atman). But this self is not an abidingly existent (or recalcitrant, in Merleau-Ponty’s terminology) entity that endures across the dynamic flux of experience. Rather, it is a conventional entity that is composed of the interaction of various existential elements. Calling the Wheel’s center or axis where all the spokes are connected the core of the self is a misconstrual of the Wheel’s interrelations. The Buddha’s insight was to eliminate these spokes, for by doing so, by taking away each spoke, by stripping the Wheel of its inner supports, the Wheel collapses. There is nothing left at the center without the spokes to (relationally) bring it into existence (for the axis and spokes depend on each other for their existence, and therefore, are non-self-existent). Thus, Nagarjuna would agree with Merleau-Ponty’s conclusions that there is no archimedian point of self, no Cartesian-like consciousness, no transcendental subject constituting experience through intentional acts (qua Husserl). There is no neg-entity thinking nothingness in its purity in order to be open to worldly experience (qua Sartre). There is, positively speaking, a dynamically situated experiencing that is constantly decentered in the lived-body.

The lived-body, whether it is considered as a corporeal entity or relationally originated phenomena, displays an inherent openness to the world. For Merleau-Ponty this is illustrated by the perceptual openness that we have to the world. Our interrogation of this openness, of our perceptual faith, is the origin of philosophy. It is the questioning and examination of experience, and self-reflexively, of the experiencing itself (qua the hyper-dialectic). We are open to the world which exists in an interrogative mode. The interactions of the lived-body and the world elicit questionings. Furthermore, openness is not simply limited to perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that this fundamental human trait of interrogation also expresses itself in other areas (e.g. the arts, politics, the physical and social sciences, literature, etc.). Openness for Nagarjuna has similar characteristics, but its ends are significantly different.

There are explicit soteriological goals in Buddhism. The realization of anatman is the experiential state of enlightenment wherein duhkha is eliminated. Enlightenment is the understanding and experiencing of sunyata. This is the state of wisdom called prajna; it is a knowing that has gone beyond the merely conventional claims that pertain to samsara, the world of change. It is the attainment of nirvana. Thus, the soteriological goals are those of a complete and unfettered openness to the world. This is the freedom from duhkha, and the freedom to actively follow the ideals of the Eight-Fold Path. Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly advocate meditation (dhyana and samadhi) such as that prescribed by Buddhism, nor does he believe in an enlightened wisdom like prajna. However, he was certainly aware of Husserl’s spiritual speculations in regard to phenomenology:

Perhaps it will even become manifest that the total phenomenological attitude and the epoche belonging to it are destined in essence to effect, at first, a complete personal
transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion, which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to [hu]mankind as such. (Husserl, 1970 p. 137)

Merleau-Ponty, in re-appropriating the epoche and not adhering to its metaphysical claims and subsequent ontological implications, understands that the interrogation of the perceptual faith regarding phenomena (that is, phenomenology) has, at least, the potential to transform not only the individual phenomenologist, but also all corporeal interrogators. Phenomenology as a possible religious conversion is universal in scope. This is certainly a characteristic of Nagarjuna’s Madhyamika Buddhism.

In sum, existence for Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna is situated, perspectival, corporeal and experiential. The lived-body is a focus for our existence, but it is a focus that moves in and out of focus. Experiences arise out of many factors and elements which are in constant dynamic flux. This precludes the possibility of determining an absolute ground of inherent self-existence upon which to build a foundation for adhering to substances like the self, soul or atman.

**Reversibility and Pratitya-samutpada**

The experiential notions of reversibility and pratitya-samutpada are the core ontological insights of Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna, respectively. Reversibility characterizes the nature of the experiences of the lived-body. Relational origination, as crystallized by Nagarjuna’s writings, is the fundamental trait of our experiences in the world of change and suffering (samsara). Reversibility is in constant motion, for when it seems as though a final position (perspective) can be reached, experience unveils a reversal. The movement towards completion alters its course and returns or rebounds upon the experiencer, only to reverse itself once more. The coiling up of experience upon itself is continual. This reciprocating dynamic of existential experience nominally begins with perception, but actually extends to all aspects of experience. Nagarjuna’s understanding of pratitya-samutpada follows a similar course.

Relational origination is the philosophical extension of the doctrine of anatman to all entities beyond that of the self (atman). Relational origination highlights the reciprocating dynamic that emerges in our experiences. Nagarjuna uses the tetralemma to illustrate the nature of this experiential notion. Conventionally understood entities exist, but they exist as themselves only in a context, a phenomenological Gestalt qua Merleau-Ponty. The context supports or is fundamentally interrelated to the focused upon (interrogated) entity. This satisfies the first two parts of the tetralemma: the entity is what it is; and the entity is what it is by what it is not, that is, what is other to it. Furthermore, the entity is a combination of the first two parts, it is what it is by both what it is and what it is not. This is the third part of the tetralemma. The movement between the two poles of sameness/identity and alterity/difference that never completes itself means that the entity is neither what it is, nor what it is not: it is always somewhere between or in the middle of the extremes. These extremes are the products of logico-conceptual thinking, and are not
indicative of the existential nature of the object’s *really real* (Jacobson, 1983, p. 98) ontological status (*qua* relationally originated and non-self-existent). Merleau-Ponty writes,

> Whether we are dealing with organisms or animal societies, we do not find things subject to the law of all or nothing [that is, existence or non-existence], but rather dynamic, unstable equilibria in which every rearrangement resumes already latent activities and transfigures them by decentering them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 165)

Therein the fourth part of the tetralemma is satisfied. Essentially, Merleau-Ponty rejects the ‘law’ of excluded middle when it comes to questions of existence. Madison, in his examination of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, refers to a statement by Merleau-Ponty that is appropriate in this context:

> There are two senses, and only two, of the word ‘exist’: one exists as a thing or else one exists as a consciousness. The experience of our own body, on the other hand, reveals to us an ambiguous mode of existing. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 198)

This not only illustrates Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the traditional categories of modern philosophy, but also prefigures his later thinking on the nature of existence:

> Existence is ambiguous because it calls into question the traditional distinction of subject and object and, in doing so, one of the central, foundational principles of philosophy, the so-called law of excluded middle (a thing must be *either* this *or* that). The only way in which the perceiving subject could be described positively is in a way which is not positive at all, namely as a union of opposites, a coincidentio appositorum. (Burke and Van der Verk 1993, p. 89).

The third and fourth parts of the tetralemma express this ambiguity of existence which Merleau-Ponty explored towards the end of his career. Reversibility maintains a relativity in Merleau-Ponty’s indirect ontology; its movement moves towards, but never attains, completion. Reversibility always takes place in that gray area of ambiguity between the extremes (that is, objectifications) of experience. This mirrors Nagarjuna’s understanding of *pratitya-samutpada*.

The experiential notions of Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna resemble each other. However, they are not exactly identical. There is a subtle, but pernicious difference that must be recognized within this context. Even though these notions indicate that there is an ontological paralleling that emerges in their philosophies, the chiasmatic or abyssal character of the flesh cannot be directly assimilated to *sunyata*. For one, an obvious difference lies in the soteriological ends of Nagarjuna’s thought which are, at best, only latently hidden within Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. This is not to say that he would not be open to the transformational possibilities of phenomenological philosophy (as mentioned above).

Second, the notion of the flesh approaches the world from the perspective of Being. Admittedly, this is existence understood as becoming via temporal dehiscence – Merleau-Ponty certainly incorporates the world’s dynamism into his philosophy. This is exemplified by his phenomenological writings which have been influenced by art, literature, politics, and history. In other words, the flesh is closer to the world understood as *samsara*, not as *nirvana*. Yet, Nagarjuna holds that the truly enlightened individual does not experience any difference between *samsara* and *nirvana*. 
Thus, the Buddha or a \textit{bodhisattva} would approach the notion of the \textit{flesh} as the world of change from the \textit{non-perspective of Emptiness}. The Buddhist’s position on the \textit{flesh} would be one of \textit{no point of view}, the ideal of the Middle Path, whereas Merleau-Ponty’s point of view would have to be called \textit{ambiguous}. In both cases, neither perspective nor non-perspective is taken as absolute.

Given these two qualifications, we must understand that the \textit{flesh} is not \textit{Being per se}. The \textit{flesh} expresses for Merleau-Ponty the chiasmatic and abyssal characteristics of experience, that is, its relationality. The world in its dehiscent becoming constantly opens and closes itself (in momentariness): its reversals never find completion, new relations constantly emerge in our experiences while others slip into the past as historical sedimentations. Merleau-Ponty thus contends that there are many perspectives with \textit{no one point of view} being absolutely final. This is the abyss of existence which we stare into and which we interrogate with our perceptual faith. However, this abyss is not a nihilism \textit{par excellence}, for the world has/manifests an intrinsic meaningfulness. That is to say, the autochthonous organization of the world consists in the dynamic interweaving and interconnecting relations of phenomena. This is the criss-crossing of patterns and significances of the chiasmatic reality which we intersubjectively interrogate and inhabit. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm metaphor is none other than his attempt (though unknowingly) to express an experiential and existential notion of relational origination (\textit{pratitya-samutpada}) in terms of perceptual dehiscence via the movements of reversibility.

Temporality plays a significant role in reversibility and \textit{pratitya-samutpada}, though neither are solely reducible to the pure dynamism of temporality. The ontological perspectives of Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna incorporate the radicality of dynamic change. The former’s existential analysis reveals a certain level of staticity in experience. This is the recalcitrance which phenomena display in regard to the efforts of interrogation. This \textit{position} is mollified or softened by Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of \textit{ecart} or \textit{dehiscence}. Dehiscence is the momentariness and impermanence of phenomenal experience. The emergent nature of the new, unique and other (alterity), in Nagarjuna’s thought, emphasizes this dynamism as well. Thus, the role of temporality for these two thinkers is primarily existential; comparatively though, Merleau-Ponty tends to be more concerned with the abidingness of structures and meanings – without, however, acceding to the idea that they remain eternal, immortal, or absolute.

The abidingness of structures is evident in the context of our sociality. To be certain. For example, the archeological remains of artifacts are prime examples of temporally enduring structures filled with meanings that are ready for interpretation and analysis. Merleau-Ponty’s main concerns, in regard to our experiences of abidingness, are found in his approaches to the issues of 20th century Western thought. He understands that structures and meanings arise out of the intersubjective interactions within and between societies. The interrelated dynamics of his indirect ontology maintain that societies and their organization are characterized in the same manner as the perceptual experiences of the situatedness of the sentient lived-bodies that intersubjectively constitute such societies. In this sense, since intersubjectivity makes experience possible, the reverse is also true, experience makes
intersubjectivity possible. We always experience the world and our sociality together; to experience the world is to experience at once the sociality of things:

Our relationship to the social is, like our relationship to the world, deeper than any express perception or any judgement. It is false to place ourselves in society as an object among other objects, as it is to place society within ourselves as an object of thought, and in both cases the mistake lies in treating the social as an object. We must return to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and which we carry about inseparably with us before any objectification. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 362)

Our existence (as subjectivities) and sociality are so intertwined that any consideration of the one without the other will always provide an inadequate phenomenological account of our experiences. This is a holistic perspective, not one of high altitude thinking.

On the other hand, Nagarjuna’s view on intersubjectivity must be considered with respect to the two levels of truth. At the conventional level, the one which concerns Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity is taken for granted and is part of the interdependent emergence of mundane phenomena. But at the enlightened level, intersubjectivity becomes an explicit problem for Mahayana thought. The bodhisattva takes on the task of saving others (Others) from duhkha. The other is seen as both a conventionally existent entity and an entity devoid of inherent self-existence (that is, as empty). Being devoid of inherent self-existence means, as Nagarjuna holds, that not only is the other person nothing but a conglomeration of experiential elements, but also that the other person is a relationally originated entity that emerges from its social context (and of course worldly environs or Gestalt). Thus, Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna adhere to versions of relational social ontologies that provide existential analyses of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity. These analyses are further deepened through their critiques of language.

The Limits of Language

Wittgenstein wrote, ‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world’ (Wittgenstein, 1988, p. 149). Let us reappropriate this statement in order to avoid falling into the subjectivistic solipsism of Wittgenstein’s tractarian semiological reductionism. Merleau-Ponty could then say, ‘The joints of my language mean the joints of my world’. Language, though, is not the sole province of a given individual, it is socio-historical, and as such, it is a manifestation of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity. Language exhibits diachronic and synchronic traits (qua Saussure). It is also connected in an autochthonously organized manner to the intrinsic meaningfulness of existence. This meaningfulness is found at the joints and interstices of the flesh as it coils back upon itself in reversibility.

How would Nagarjuna view these claims? Let us continue exploring Merleau-Ponty’s understanding here in order to lay the groundwork for the explicit connections to Nagarjuna’s understanding of language’s limits.

Merleau-Ponty’s working note (that was intended for The Visible and the Invisible) regarding the object and its wires was meant to indicate the connecting joints or
tissues of the perceived phenomenal entity (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 268). Language then infuses these tissues with linguistic blood that gives life to the hidden armature of the invisible that inhabits the visible. ‘Movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and themselves [in reversibility], return toward their source and, in the patient and silent labor of desire, begin the paradox of expression’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 144). This labor to express the significances of the flesh is akin to birthing (Burke, 1993, p. 90) the meanings of existence which is ‘pregnant with its form’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 15). The linguistic agent must work, that is, act with the intention of articulating those meanings that are perceived from within the meaningfulness of the world. The meanings that are expressed by language are not the limits of the world, rather they are those significant aspects of the reversible flesh which we are attending to, attracted to, attached to, and desire after. This links the elements which contribute to duhkha in Nagarjuna’s philosophy to the specifically linguistic concerns of Merleau-Ponty.

Nagarjuna holds that language is a practical tool that ought not to be relied upon in order to attain enlightenment. He certainly understands that it is a necessary evil used to convey the Buddha’s message and teachings. But these teachings are designed to rid an individual of attachments to doctrines and points of view, for these can only contribute to duhkha. Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the nature of expression mirrors this view of language. Our passions and efforts are bound up with linguistic behavior (which of course occurs in an intersubjective milieu). Language characteristically objectifies that which it expresses. It tends to freeze and ossify the fundamentally temporal experiences to which it refers via thematization. Theories and principles are prime examples of la langue (written language) which cover over and hide the living relationships expressed in la parole (speech). But even this latter form of language runs up against limits; it cannot totally pierce the veil of silence that shrouds perceptual experience.

Experience, as understood by both Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna, actively overflows the objectifications and categorizations expressed through language. Language simply cannot say all that which can be said about some attended to perceptual experience. There are meanings always latent within the context of the experience; these remain unarticulated, though their articulation continues as a possibility. The object or phenomenal entity is embedded in a world of intrinsic meaningfulness such that the fullness of the entity’s meanings can never be totally expressed. This is the essential ineffability of relational origination. Any attempt to capture and hold the entity or all of its meanings is destined to fail; this continually frustrates the interrogator’s desires, which constantly seek after satisfactions that can never be completely satisfactory. This is the movement of reversibility and the dynamic of duhkha. In this sense, Nagarjuna would conclude that Merleau-Ponty’s existential analysis is concerned with the world of change, that is, samsara. Yet, Merleau-Ponty shares another view with Buddhism which may help alleviate this condemnation of his concern with the world of suffering.

The autocriticality of the hyper-dialectic, the phenomenological method of The Visible and the Invisible (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), can be used in a fashion similar to the tetralemma insofar as it can aid in cutting off one’s attachments to the
components that perpetuate suffering. To be certain, the Buddha’s admonishment not to rely on doctrine for the attainment of enlightenment readily lends itself as a critique of linguistic theories and principles. However, this admonishment was not always followed, as exemplified by the doctrines of the Sarvastivada, the Sautrantika, and the systematic scholasticism of the Abhidharma literature that developed after the Buddha’s death. These examples indicate the effects of linguistic sedimentation of which Merleau-Ponty was so acutely aware in (the) terms of the Western tradition.

The tetralemma is one of the linguistic devices that was actually used by the Buddha (in his sermons) to try to avoid dogmatic doctrines. It is employed as a means to analytically deconstruct to the point of absurdity or contradiction, claims about the true nature of existential experience; Nagarjuna uses the tetralemma in his prasanga-style arguments. (The Ch’an/Zen koan developed out of this method by disposing of the method altogether and expressing the absurdities or contradictions without the methodological baggage of argumentation.) In a similar fashion, the hyper-dialectic’s autocriticality radicalizes the interrogator’s or philosopher’s situatedness (Johnson & Smith, 1990, p. 170). This radicalization occurs through the democratization of linguistically formulated claims by placing them in perspective. This relativizes the ideas (the invisibles) that are embodied in language. It undermines their supposed self-existence, just as the tetralemma is designed to do. The perspectival nature of ideas and meanings situates them in the chiasmatic abyss of the flesh.

The objectifications that language produces are in reality only limited expressions that fail to completely capture the dynamic relations out of which the meanings of phenomena originate. There is always more to be said about any given experience. The misguided understanding of what these meanings entail in terms of their existential and ontological significances contribute to the continuation of duhkha. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the relation between desire and the objectifications of language could be greatly enhanced by incorporating Nagarjuna’s existential analysis of suffering. Buddhism would grant his understanding of language an impetus in the direction towards which his existential psychology and indirect ontology implicitly points.

Nagarjuna’s crystallization of the experiential notion of sunyata, on the other hand, is itself an example of linguistic sedimentation. The philosophical development of this notion as based on the doctrine of anatman shows that Buddhist thought is eminently historical1 (Suzuki, 1956). The relationality of phenomena which indicates their lack of inherent self-existence, is not simply a matter of momentary existence. To this extent, the relational origination of entities is intrinsically interconnected to the intersubjective context within which such entities are considered. This relationality thus reaches across the temporality of human existence. In this regard, a certain conventional level of phenomenal recalcitrance elicits a historically based understanding to the notion of emptiness from within Buddhism itself. This recalcitrance is carried along in the languages used to convey the teachings of the Buddha (e.g. Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, etc.). Of course there are no claims that language itself is the experience of enlightenment, for to hold this, is to confuse and conflate samsara with nirvana. Essentially, any
understanding of the experiential notion of sunyata is relative to, though not absolutely dependent upon, the intersubjective context in which it is experienced. Thus, sunyata is historical and temporal for each situated practitioner of Buddhism.

Language as the body of thought (qua Merleau-Ponty) can convey the Buddha’s teachings, but it is also burdened with the historical and cultural nature of its meanings. We must take into account our essential interrelations with others and the past, for ‘in so far as we live with others, no judgement we make on them is possible which leaves us out, and which places them at a distance’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 41). In this sense, the developments in comparative philosophy into this century require an openly auto-critical interrogation of not only our perceptual faith (experience), but also our encounters with and translations of other philosophical systems. This illustrates Gadamer’s hermeneutic goal of the fusion of horizons (Gadainer, 1989). This goal assumes the existence of joints, of similarities which we employ in the creation of understanding, particularly across our differences. Only through respecting these differences without violently reducing them to our preconceived categories, can the multiplicity of these horizons be maintained and expanded. This calls for, or minimally assumes the existence of implicit ethical relations. Thus, comparative philosophy must be performed within an ethic, an ethic that is grounded in the very sociality of human existence.

**Autochthonous Organization and the Dharma**

This concluding section examines the intrinsic meaningfulness of existence. The world exists as an interconnected dynamic system of relationally originated phenomena; this is the world-matrix. This is manifest in all of our perspectives on the world; it ranges from the quantum theoretical level, to the psycho-physical constitution of the individual, to the socio-historical factors of human civilization. Phenomena display an inherent logos or dharma. At the level of human interaction this is evidenced by our relations to others qua Others. These relations are essential to our existences as human beings. Human interaction with Others or the world in general, is essentially social. Intersubjectivity is as much a part of us as we are parts of it. The two are mutually co-evolving and co-constituting.

Intersubjectivity is an aspect of the phenomenal world. We, as subjectivities, constitute and are constituted by the phenomenon of intersubjectivity. This is in accordance with the existential analyses of Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna; we are corporeal entities in and of the world. This world is autochthonously organized and such organization extends into the social fabric of intersubjectivity. For Nagarjuna, part of the sens of the term dharma is this organization. Both philosophers understand that just as the world is meaningful, so too is the phenomenon of intersubjectivity. Their relational social ontologies incorporate (implicitly for Merleau-Ponty, and explicitly for Nagarjuna) ethical structures that organize human interaction. Dillon directly alludes to the pragmatic and moral aspects encompassed in Merleau-Ponty’s autochthonous organization (Dillon, 1995, p. 52). Similarly, Nagarjuna’s defense of the fourth aspect of the noble truth, the eight-fold noble path, and his advocacy of the ten pure actions indicate that the sociality of mundane
phenomena requires ethical conduct (sila) in the attainment of enlightenment. Dynamically emergent individuals, bodhisattvas for Nagarjuna and, perhaps, honest political leaders for Merleau-Ponty, arise out of an existence that is inherently intersubjective, and thereby ethically meaningful and structured. In this sense, human existence is the ground for ethics.

How can we justify this claim according to the philosophical perspectives of Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna? The reasons for this are manifold in the relational factors that contribute to the social organization of our intersubjective world. These factors indicate what would figure into understanding the intrinsic ethic that organizes our sociality as human beings. This shows the interdependent nature that individuals have with respect to each other. This is exemplified in the social agent’s ethical responsibility he/she has towards the Other. This responsibility has pragmatic ends, as in the case of Merleau-Ponty, wherein certain goals can only be accomplished through the communal efforts of a given social group (praxis). On the other hand, Nagarjuna’s contribution to understanding this aspect of the social responsibility of the self for the Other involves taking actions that aim at salvation for oneself and the Other (qua the bodhisattva).

For comparative philosophy, attaining an understanding of other cultures and philosophies is a matter of respect and trust that ought to grow out of our responsibility for the Other. Respect ought to be maintained for the differences between social groups: each group or individual should communicate with others without violently reducing their societies or others to what they are not; in other words, it is imperative to avoid imperialistically imposing preconceived (metaphysical) categories onto oneself and/or Others. This characterization of communication may sound as if it were a hermeneutic project concerned with developing metalanguages between societies that aim at some kind of objective field of inquiry. This is incorrect, for as has been shown in the thought of Merleau-Ponty and Nagarjuna, there can be no direct reduction of one set of ideas to another. Rather, there exists certain confluences that stem from our essential similarities to each other and the common world which we all share. The understanding of these existential connections must be conditioned by the fundamental differences between oneself and Others. It is ethically incumbent upon us to preserve these differences.

Part of these differences stem from the perspectival nature of interrogation: not only are our perceptual capacities located in the motility of the lived-body, but the lived-body as a social entity can only communicate and understand other societies through its own situatedness in its own society, cultural world, and (socio-cultural) horizons (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 362). In this sense, the hyper-dialectic reappropriates our own prejudices (pre-judgments) in order to avoid reducing our understanding of the Other or other society via some kind of metaphysical violence to some set of pre-conceived notions. Such reduction, for example, has historically been the purview of Western philosophy’s obstinate insistence that it is the sole bearer of reason and rational criteria when judging other traditions. This violates the respect for the complete alterity of the Other as demanded of us by ethics. Comparative philosophy is one approach that (ideally) ought to circumvent such disrespectful actions.
Furthermore, the differences between individual societies or philosophies ought not to be considered as a threat or a danger. Different perspectives, even understood from a purely pragmatic view, only provide us with more information and a better understanding of the phenomena that is the subject of our interrogations. These differences provide a richness to our experiences, experiences which we can share due to our similarities. Thus, if human existence is the grounds for ethics, then both identity (universality) and difference (particularity) must be taken as beneficial phenomena. Alterity thereby takes on a positive ethical valuation. In this regard, respect and responsibility are essential characteristics of our inherent experiential sociality. The Other is valuable to us, for we are open to the call of the Other. We are not discussing values based on principles, rights or quantities, all of which are products of extreme views, misunderstandings regarding existential experience, and conventional constructs of language. Rather, the Other is relationally interactive with us (qua lived-bodies) at an originary or primodial level.\(^2\) The sociality of our existence grounds the ethics in which we live. Our dynamic and interrelational natures as existential entities follow an autochthonous organization or Dharma that permeates not only our perceptual experiences of the world, but also each other.

Does not an ethic with a good that includes alterity unrelentingly relativize this as an ethical valuation? This would be an extreme position, something both philosophers would reject. Instead, alterity as a good arises only in relation to the similarities that give it expression. These are the similarities we have as social agents. This ought to be the metaphysic behind virtues, but one that is based on an existential analysis of human experience. It is not a metaphysic of reason, or a binary logic of identity and difference.

As virtues are based upon existential experience, they are subject to change (that is, difference). This is built into each virtue’s basis in alterity. Merleau-Ponty’s hyper-dialectic and Nagarjuna’s tetralemma can then function as the auto-critical elements for virtues so as to avoid the objectifying tendencies of language’s reifications. This keeps virtues ‘down to earth’ by preventing them from becoming aspects of systematized doctrines that do not have self-corrective mechanisms to deal with our dynamic existential experiences. Virtues can then act as correctives for the projects of comparative philosophy. In this manner, they can prevent the direct assimilation or reduction of any one philosophy to another, all the while maintaining a common ground (of human experience) upon which to conduct constructive dialogues. These dialogues can then broaden our perspectives and support our essential openness to the world of perceptual experience, via existential analysis, and to the Other, via the ethical nature of our sociality.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored the connections between Merleau-Ponty’s and Nagarjuna’s philosophies. Their ontologies have some striking resemblances and some significant differences. The latter contribute to our understanding of the nature of existence. Existence for both is intrinsically meaningful. The implications of this for human beings means that our existences as intersubjective entities also follow an intrinsic
meaningfulness. Therefore, the outcomes of their ontological speculations point to, at least implicitly in Merleau-Ponty and explicitly in Nagarjuna, an existential ethic that pervades our social interactions. The dynamic and relational character of their ontologies necessarily involves an intersubjective element, and as such, an ethic.

Existence as an ethic with alterity (and similarity) as positive valuations requires a level of autocriticality that takes into account impermanence. However, this account itself has been rather abstract. What exactly can virtues do so as to help us decide our ethical choices? What are the concrete benefits to being virtuous – besides the theoretical advocacy of treating alternative philosophies or world-views (perspectives) with respect and charity? In other words, what can we pragmatically accomplish with virtues?

To do this, Nagarjuna’s thought will have to be brought into the late 20th century by showing the relevancy of its soteriological aims for our socio-political and environmental future. By appealing to these virtues outlined above, we may be able to reverse these questions in order to provide Merleau-Ponty with a philosophical framework in which to couch an ethics as based upon his ontology, for his ethics lacks a clear development in his philosophy. Such an attempt will have to be explored in another project that examines Nagarjuna’s ethical ideals and Merleau-Ponty’s political thought.

Notes
[1] See chapters 2 and 3 in Suzuki (1956). Though Suzuki views Buddhism’s historical development through a very Japanese perspective, his general thesis that it has undergone transformations over the passage of time remains valid and textually supportable.

[2] Perhaps, and this is purely a speculative point in this regard, Kant (1988) was attempting to describe this aspect of our experience in his discussions of respect and interest for the pure practical reason (notes on pp. 26 and 93, respectively). Reason takes an interest in its actions to become practical with regard to its object of universally valid maxims. Yet, it is motivated by a special feeling which actuates reason itself. This feeling is the respect that reason generates by itself. But we should notice that our motive to follow our duty in this case, is a rationally produced sentiment—a moral feeling with subjective or particular effects due to the pleasure we feel from doing our duty. Thus, there are both universal and particular components to the ethical act; they are inseparable even for Kant’s metaphysics.

References


