

Affirmative Nirvāṇa and Science of Spirit

AFFIRMATIVE NIRVĀṆA: CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN NĀGĀRJUNA AND GILLES DELEUZE

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Abstract

Based on a Nietzschean narrative, this article explores conceptual encounters between the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-250 CE) and the post-structuralist Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995 CE), which can be clearly articulated with regard to their similar conceptions of negation. Both philosophers vehemently rejected the reduction of difference to the negative and were able to initiate a strictly philosophical resistance against the orthodox philosophies of their respective place and time. Nevertheless, Nāgārjuna – in my view – goes one step further than Deleuze by arguing for a non-conceptual, absolute indifference which is capable of embracing difference without reducing it. While this affirmative notion of indifference perhaps seems counter-intuitive for the Western reader, I explore its conceptual relation to absolute freedom and compassion by employing both Eastern and Western, historical and contemporary sources.

Keywords: *Nāgārjuna, Gilles Deleuze, Buddhism, Mādhyamaka, negation, affirmation, difference, indifference, freedom, compassion*

Nietzsche's Hypothesis

According to a Nietzschean narrative, a cross-cultural parallel can be drawn between the emergence of Buddhism in ancient India and what Nietzsche calls “European Nihilism”¹ in the modern era. Nietzsche goes as far as to speak of the Europe of his time as being “threatened by a new Buddhism”² and reminds us throughout his oeuvre that Western philosophy, in its entire history, did not go beyond a certain threshold which Indian philosophers had already encountered more than two millennia before. He finds the reason for this outrageous ‘delay’ in

¹ The term “European Nihilism” only appears in the posthumously published work *The Will to Power*; for more information on its various editions see the edition of Walter Kaufmann: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. & trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 116.

Christianity: for Nietzsche, Christian philosophers from Plato³ to Hegel only prolonged the emergence of an absolute nihilism instead of pushing civilization further to its inevitable limits. Christianity, in this sense, is also nihilistic; but only to the extent that it disguises nihilism, while Buddhism is its outright manifestation. This is why Schopenhauer, as the “first European Buddhist,”⁴ plays such a crucial role in Nietzsche’s work: against the ‘sophistry’ of Hegel, he makes us aware of the real danger of every civilization. For Nietzsche, this danger cannot be eluded by simply ignoring it while following the naïve optimism of common sense. The only way out of this vale of tears is a *radical* optimism, or a “pessimism of strength.”⁵

We must be careful, however, not to take Nietzsche’s enthusiastic words too seriously. An initial problem can be seen in the supposed determinism – or even teleology – in socio-cultural processes which, unlike the objects of the natural sciences, always seem to be subject to a certain contingency and freedom. Following Adorno’s critique of historical determinism,⁶ it will be more accurate to understand Nietzsche’s prophecy of the rise and fall of civilizations merely as a *hypothesis* concerning general *tendencies* of socio-cultural processes that one is always free to accelerate or to fight against.

A second critique of Nietzsche’s claim lies in his attempt to unify a multiplicity of historical processes under abstract terms such as ‘Buddhism’, ‘Christianity’, ‘modernity’, taking their identity ($A = A$) for granted. In this article, instead, I shall attempt to free these multiplicities by decoupling them from their supposed monolithic identities by drawing on two unconventional thinkers: the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-250) and the post-structuralist Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995). My aim is to examine Nietzsche’s hypothesis of a cross-cultural parallel between ‘Buddhism’ and European ‘modernity’ on the grounds of their similar views of *negation*. Overall, the hypothesis will be shown to hold, though – surprisingly – not in terms of nihilism. We shall, moreover, see that despite their similarities, Nāgārjuna and Deleuze employ different ontologies of which the former offers new perspectives on contemporary thought.

Nāgārjuna’s Concept of *Nirvāṇa*

Nāgārjuna, known to be the founder of the Mahāyāna Buddhist school Mādhyamaka, argued for the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all phenomena. *Nirvāṇa*, in this sense, would be the state of mind in which one has fully understood the emptiness of everything; yet, the philosophical concept of *nirvāṇa* leads to a whole cluster of paradoxes that Nāgārjuna addresses in his “Examination of Nirvāṇa”:

If all this is empty,
Then there is no arising or passing away.

³ In Nietzsche’s view, “Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’,” *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ Julian Young, “Arthur Schopenhauer: the first European Buddhist,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, Aug. 24, 2017: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/arthur-schopenhauer-footnotes-to-plato>

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 4.

⁶ Adorno criticizes Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* for its relativism and “gloomy” determinism. See Theodor W. Adorno, “Was Spengler Right?,” *Encounter*, Vol. 26/1 (1966), pp. 25-28.

By the relinquishing or ceasing of what
Does one wish *nirvāṇa* to arise?⁷

For Nāgārjuna, the emptiness of a phenomenon means that it is devoid of inherent existence (*svabhāva*), that is: essence or independent existence.⁸ If all phenomena are empty, then they exist only on a conventional level – as illusion – and not on an ontological level. Whatever they might ‘do’ – arising, enduring, ceasing, etc. – never truly happens. In the Buddhist context, *nirvāṇa* is usually described as a state of mind which can be attained through the relinquishing of worldly desires. But if there are no desires in the first place, they cannot cease. And if there is no *nirvāṇa* in the first place, it cannot arise.

If all this is nonempty,
Then there is no arising or passing away.
By the relinquishing or ceasing of what
Does one wish *nirvāṇa* to arise?⁹

Going further, Nāgārjuna uses the same argument to attack the opposite view: that everything indeed *has* inherent existence. He shows that this would be quite an awkward view, because then there would be no change whatsoever. Take for instance the pencil lying on my table: if it had inherent existence, then it would be lying here *forever*. Considering this example, Nāgārjuna’s point that nothing has inherent existence becomes clearer, since *anything* absolutely independent and permanent would be contradictory to the scientific worldview: it would be a miracle. But how about *nirvāṇa*? Is it a scientific concept or not rather a religious one? If *nirvāṇa* had inherent existence, then it would already *be*, like the Being of Parmenides, or the Judeo-Christian God. But within the Buddhist context, *nirvāṇa* has to be achieved in order to arise. If it is already there, it cannot arise, it cannot be achieved. Accordingly, *nirvāṇa* cannot have inherent existence, which excludes it at least from the realm of positive ‘theology’.

In the following passages,¹⁰ *nirvāṇa* is described in a way quite similar to the *via negativa* in the European tradition of negative theology (from Plotinus to Derrida). But we should always keep in mind that the cultural context is entirely different. The opponents Nāgārjuna has in mind are not only the heterodox schools of so-called ‘Hinduism’ (*āstika*) but in particular the Buddhists of his time, who – in his view – had corrupted the original teachings of the Buddha with a dualistic understanding of *nirvāṇa* within which the latter was imagined as an otherworldly place or entity.

Unrelinquished, unattained,
Unannihilated, not permanent,
Unarisen, unceased:

⁷ Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s ‘Mūlamadhyamakārikā’*, trans. & comm. Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 322-323.

⁸ Nāgārjuna, *Nāgārjuna’s ‘Seventy Stanzas’: A Buddhist Psychology of Emptiness*, trans. & comm. David Ross Komito (Ithaca NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1987), p. 79.

⁹ Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 323.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 323-330.

This is how *nirvāṇa* is described.¹¹

The translator Jay L. Garfield notes that all predicates attributed to *nirvāṇa* here are expressed with negative particles, both in the original Sanskrit and in the Tibetan translation.¹² Before having a closer look at the negated predicates, we need to note that Nāgārjuna does not describe *nirvāṇa* with any positive quality. *Whatever* predicate one might add to the list – calm, beautiful, sublime, etc. – it will have to be negated: not calm, not beautiful, not sublime, etc. In Nāgārjuna’s actual description of *nirvāṇa*, it is remarkable that he negates both its permanence (inherent existence) and its change (due to its emptiness). Accordingly, their negations cannot be logical opposites – for if they were logical opposites, they would be contradictory. Nāgārjuna’s way of negating, here, appears to avoid contradictions.

In the following tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*) of *nirvāṇa* discussed by Nāgārjuna, the term of existence is not used in the sense of inherent existence but in the sense of conventional existence: there is a switch from Being (*svabhāva*) to being (*bhāva*). The question is no longer whether *nirvāṇa* exists inherently – for it certainly does not – but whether it exists at all:

a) not existent

Nirvāṇa is not existent.
It would then have the characteristics of age and death.
There is no existent entity
Without age and death.¹³

The overall characteristic of conventional existence, i.e. of entities, is that they pass away. But *nirvāṇa*, even though it is not permanent (see previous quote), is said to be without age and death. Whatever is without age and death cannot exist. Therefore, *nirvāṇa* does not exist.¹⁴

b) not non-existent

If *nirvāṇa* were not existent,
How could it be appropriate for it to be nonexistent?
Where *nirvāṇa* is not existent,
It cannot be a nonexistent.¹⁵

At this point, we need to be careful in order not to confuse two different kinds of negation. Garfield differentiates between the terms ‘not existent’ and ‘non-existent’, but he does not give

¹¹ Ibid., p. 323.

¹² Ibid., p. 323.

¹³ Ibid., p. 324.

¹⁴ The passage just quoted is followed by two further passages using the same argument by replacing the characteristic of age and death – once with the characteristic of compoundedness, once with the characteristic of dependence. In order to avoid repetitions, I here leave out several passages which seem less relevant for the purpose of this paper.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 327.

any further explanation with reference to the original text. A glance at David J. Kalupahana's transliteration of the Sanskrit text, however, shows that Garfield's translation is literal:

Yadi bhāvo na nirvāṇam abhāvaḥ kiṃ bhiṣyati,
nirvāṇam yatra bhāvo na nābhāvas tatra vidyate.¹⁶

We see that Garfield writes 'not existent' where the negation in the original text is formed with the independent negative particle 'na' (*bhāva na*), and 'nonexistent' where it is formed with the prefix 'a-' (*abhāva*). As Jan Westerhoff notes, the distinction between *prasajya*-negation ('na') and *paryudāsa*-negation ('a-') is a common trope in the cultural context of Nāgārjuna.¹⁷ In the latter case, we need to understand the non-existence of *nirvāṇa* as a positive characterization, which in a negative 'theology', indeed, would not be appropriate. If *nirvāṇa* does not exist, then it is also not a non-existent, for there is nothing at all which could be characterized as non-existent. Accordingly, not even the popular assumption that *nirvāṇa* is some sort of ultimate *nothingness* would be appropriate.

c) not both

The following passages deal with the assumption that *nirvāṇa* would be both existent and non-existent.¹⁸ We will see that in this case Nāgārjuna acknowledges contradictions as such.

If *nirvāṇa* were both
Existent and nonexistent,
Passing beyond would, impossibly,
Be both existent and nonexistent.¹⁹

This is just a simple contradiction. But how are contradictions possible here, provided that they did not occur before? As we have seen in *b)*, Nāgārjuna uses two different kinds of negation, of which one is a neutral or indeterminate negation (*prasajya*), e.g. 'not existent', and one is a logical negation (*paryudāsa*), e.g. 'non-existent'. The whole point is that, in order to form a contradiction, both statements must be positive: even the statement 'x is non-P' is a positive characterisation and can, thus, contradict with 'x is P'.²⁰ On the other hand, 'x is not P' is not even a statement and, thus, forecloses the possibility of contradictions:

¹⁶ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, trans. & comm. David J. Kalupahana (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 1991), p. 360.

¹⁷ Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 68ff.

¹⁸ Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, pp. 328-329.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

²⁰ In interpreting Nāgārjuna it is helpful to keep in mind that his main opponent (besides other Buddhist scholars) is the orthodox school called Nyāya, known for its elaborate system of logic. For Nyāya, the negation of a property, non-P, is a property in its own right; negation, in this sense, is a matter of the object in question (*paryudāsa*), not merely of language (*prasajya*). Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, shows how this view leads to contradictions. For example, 'Squares are non-round' is a positive characterization of squares. But such a logic of predication cannot simply be applied to *nirvāṇa*.

How could *nirvāṇa*
 Be both existent and nonexistent?
 These two cannot be in the same place.
 Like light and darkness.²¹

This is Nāgārjuna's most unambiguous statement that *nirvāṇa* cannot be both existent and non-existent because that would be contradictory. 'Light and darkness' cannot 'be in the same place' because light can only become present in the absence of darkness, darkness in the absence of light. So too, in language they must be logical opposites: non-light must be darkness, and non-darkness must be light. It is the same with the existence and the non-existence of *nirvāṇa*: as they are logical opposites, assuming that *nirvāṇa* is both existent and non-existent would be contradictory.

d) not neither

The result of the passages discussed so far would actually be that *nirvāṇa* is neither existent nor non-existent. But we will see that this also cannot be said.

Nirvāṇa is said to be
 Neither existent nor nonexistent.
 If the existent and the nonexistent were established,
 This would be established.²²

Here we have a similar argument to the one in *b)*, but it is more complex. We remember that *nirvāṇa* is not existent but it neither can be said to be non-existent, because this would be a positive characterization of nothing at all (not of nothingness). In the present case, we must understand the proposition 'neither existent nor non-existent' as another *positive* characterization: the term 'neither', here, is the logical negation of the existence of *nirvāṇa*, and of its non-existence. Now, 'both' means: '*nirvāṇa* is existent and non-existent', which is a contradiction. And 'neither' means '*nirvāṇa* is non-existent and non-non-existent', which turns out to be a contradiction as well! For 'non-non-existent', as a double logical negation, turns out to be logically positive again, which translates 'neither' into '*nirvāṇa* is non-existent and existent'. Accordingly, 'neither' and 'both' mean exactly the same thing: if 'both' were established, also 'neither' would be established; but they are not, because they are both contradictory.²³

Thus, the main points of Nāgārjuna's discussion of *nirvāṇa* fall within the formalized logical tetralemma:

²¹ Ibid., p. 329.

²² Ibid., p. 330.

²³ It is frustrating that Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭi* has caused so much confusion among present-day logicians while Nāgārjuna's text is, in fact, very clear. The indeterminate negation must be certainly applied not only to *d)* but to all steps of the *catuṣkoṭi*. What present-day logicians do not see is the *dialectical development* of Nāgārjuna's text which leads to the misleading question about the relevance of *d)*, since *c)* and *d)* are logically equivalent. *d)* is relevant for Nāgārjuna as to clarify that even 'neither existent nor non-existent' can mistakenly be understood as a positive statement. On the controversy about Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭi* see Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka*, p. 74ff.

- a) not A
- b) not $\neg A$
- c) not $A \wedge \neg A$
- d) not $\neg(A \vee \neg A)$

We can conclude our discussion of the tetralemma with the recap that *nirvāṇa* cannot be said to be existent *a*), nor non-existent *b*), nor both *c*), nor neither *d*). But one has to be careful here not to fall back into another positive characterization, as this would only lead to further contradictions. In order to avoid these contradictions, Nāgārjuna makes use of *indeterminate* negations (*prasajya*). As we have seen, these negations are in harsh contrast to Hegel's notion of the negative (i.e. *determinate* negation), as they are not logically opposed to the negated terms at all but rather express a simple *difference* between the name and the named. In this sense, *nirvāṇa* is always the *other* and never the negative.

It is possible to argue that the principle of logical negation is but a superficial form of nihilism (as is Christianity for Nietzsche), whereas the principle of difference unfolds the most radical negation and absolute nihilism. Yet, with regard to *difference* the similarities between Nāgārjuna and Deleuze become so apparent that it seems worthwhile to further question its nihilistic connotations.

Deleuze's Concept of Difference

Among post-structuralist thinkers, Gilles Deleuze is perhaps the most prominent defender of difference against its reduction to the negative. Within the terms of his transcendental empiricism, difference is the primary condition of the transcendental field, whereas the negative always comes second and belongs to the level of representation. In this section I will first link Deleuze's concept of difference with Nāgārjuna's concept of *nirvāṇa*, and then try to show how difference – or *nirvāṇa* – can be understood as utterly affirmative.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze brings Plato's *Sophist* into play in which Plato argues against Parmenides for the presence of non-being within the realm of Being.²⁴ The sophist, Plato's actual opponent, misuses the famous poem of Parmenides in order to claim that all statements are true: if only Being *is*, and non-Being *is not*, then no given statement can be false, for the claim of its falsity would imply the intermixture of Being with the negative. Either a statement does not exist at all – and then it cannot be false – or it must be true, which would make it impossible for Plato to distinguish the philosopher from the sophist. In order to make false statements possible, Plato had to introduce the negative into the realm of Being, even though the question of whether his notion of the negative is identical with the capital Negative of Parmenides still remains open. As a matter of fact, Plato only speaks of a non-being within the realm of Being, while absolute nothingness is still excluded.²⁵

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), p. 63.

²⁵ Plato, "Sophist" in *Theaetetus and Sophist*, ed. & trans. Christopher Rowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 240Bff.

Deleuze proposes that Plato's notion of the negative – to be properly distinguished from the non-Being of Parmenides – should be written in brackets: '(non)-being'. In this sense, it is not the negative at all but *difference*: "Difference is not the negative; on the contrary, non-being is Difference: *heteron*, not *enantion*. For this reason non-being should rather be written (non)-being or, better still, ?-being,"²⁶ the latter to emphasize the "problematic" character of difference.²⁷ Now, this interpretation of the negative in Plato may be easily transferred to the indeterminate negation (*prasajya*) in Nāgārjuna: the '(non)-' – and even more the question mark – expresses precisely this neutrality, avoiding contradictions, in contrast to the logical 'non-', provoking contradictions. It is due to this *structural similarity* that Nāgārjuna's concept of *nirvāṇa* can be linked – over the distance of thousands of miles and nearly two millennia – to Deleuze's concept of difference. In a certain sense they speak the same language.²⁸

Deleuze goes further. For him, the highest principle of European philosophy – "Being" – "is univocal"²⁹; in contrast to Hegelian dialectics, it has a single 'voice' that expresses only difference: "being is difference itself," or "Being is also non-being, *but non-being is not the being of the negative*,"³⁰ so one should place it in parentheses or add a question mark. Now, the highest principle of early Indian Buddhism is undoubtedly *nirvāṇa*; and as we have seen, in Nāgārjuna's perspective *nirvāṇa* amounts to difference, or at least the absolute *other*. The so-called highest principles may always differ in names, but those of Nāgārjuna and Deleuze show structural similarities that indicate – regardless of their distance in time and space – a vivid cross-cultural encounter on the level of philosophical thought. Both tell us not to take names and words too seriously. Both put an extra-lingual paradox on their throne,³¹ which flattens rigid hierarchies and parodies the despotic rule not only of the *same*, but also of the *negative*. And yet, at this point it is still not clear how this 'highest principle' might be understood as *affirmative* instead.

In the preface to *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze warns against the danger of a differential philosophy to lapse "into the representations of a beautiful soul": "there are only reconcilable and federative differences, far removed from bloody struggles. The beautiful soul says: we are different, but not opposed..."³² This is to say that a philosophy of pure differences has the tendency to dilute these differences to the point of absolute *indifference*: if everything is 'different', the degrees of difference become so minimal that they hardly differ anymore. In this way, the *negative* would simply be replaced by a concept of *indifference*, reducing difference – once again – to its own cancellation.³³ "Nevertheless," Deleuze continues:

²⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 64.

²⁷ Ibid., especially pp. 168ff.

²⁸ In more precise terms, Nāgārjuna's independent negative particle 'na', like the English 'not' used for indeterminate negations, can be conceptually translated as Deleuze's prefix '(non)-' or '?-' which are used to express difference.

²⁹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 35.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

³¹ Deleuze calls it a "crowned anarchy." Ibid., p. 37.

³² Ibid., p. xx.

³³ In the following section, I will argue – based on Nāgārjuna's perspective – for a *non-conceptual* indifference, which does not cancel difference but embraces it providing its ontological condition.

we believe that when these problems [differences] attain their proper degree of *positivity*, and when difference becomes the object of a corresponding *affirmation*, they release a power of aggression and selection which destroys the beautiful soul by depriving it of its very identity and breaking its good will.³⁴

According to Deleuze, we can only conceive of difference *as* difference if we understand it as *affirmative*. But this also means understanding it as a natural *aggression* of every living being, an aggression of the different against the one it differs from, perhaps in the sense of Heraclitus, according to whom the father of everything is war. This ‘war’ should not be taken in a literal sense, but rather as an *intensive play of differences*, light and free of both the burden of the negative and the carelessness of indifference.

Finally, Deleuze refers to Nietzsche in order to differentiate his notion of radical affirmation from the Hegelian idea of positivity. For Hegel, the positive only results out of the negative; it is the determinate negation (*bestimmte Negation*) that is both *canceling* and *preserving* the negated term in what he calls *Aufhebung*. In this relation, Deleuze writes:

Affirmation is indeed produced but in order to say yes to all that is negative and negating. [...] According to the other conception [Nietzsche’s], difference is primary: it affirms difference and distance. [...] It is no longer the negative which produces a phantom of affirmation like an ersatz, but rather a No which results from affirmation.³⁵

According to Deleuze, Hegel affirms only the negative, whereas Nietzsche affirms difference – affirms affirmation! – and maintains a certain “*pathos of distance*”³⁶ to everything life-denying. Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s concept of the *eternal return* presents a mirror image of Buddhism: whilst in the Hegelian succession from the negative to the positive all the “average forms” return through endless conservation, in the Nietzschean succession from affirmation to the pathos of distance only the “extreme forms” return.³⁷ “If eternal return is a wheel, then it must be endowed with a violent centrifugal movement which expels everything which ‘can’ be denied, everything which cannot pass the test.”³⁸ This ‘mirrored Buddhism’ totally agrees with the classical views of Buddhism in terms of *ontology*: what denies life, leaves the wheel; what affirms life, returns. But Deleuze’s radical affirmation values that ontology in an inverted way: denial is negated, *eternal return is affirmed*. In the same way, Nāgārjuna’s concept of *nirvāṇa* could be understood as a mirror image of ‘Buddhism’, that is: as an affirmative *physis* or chaos beyond – or rather down below – the representations of the negative.

Even though Nāgārjuna would certainly not agree with all the consequences drawn by Deleuze, my comparative approach to their conceptual *similarities* offers an alternative account of the *tendencies* involved in his concept of *nirvāṇa*. Nietzsche’s hypothesis of a cross-cultural

³⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. xx.

³⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 53f.

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 201.

³⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 54.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

parallel between Indian Buddhism and modern European philosophy certainly holds for the examples just discussed, but – not at all in terms of nihilism. Considering Deleuze as *post-modern* and Nāgārjuna as *post-Theravāda*, it certainly makes sense to suppose a tendency in both civilizations to overcome the dead end of nihilism. In both cases, the rule of the negative is not simply opposed by the naïve optimism of common sense, but by a shared intention of freeing *difference* from its nihilistic connotations. Nietzsche’s hypothesis holds in terms of difference *as* difference (at least in the sense of its emancipation from the negative). That it also holds in terms of *affirmation*, is my own hypothesis and still a question to be raised. In the following section, I offer a closer look at that question in order to show how much further we can go concerning the idea of an *affirmative nirvāṇa*, if we also take into account the *differences* between Nāgārjuna and Deleuze.

Indifference and Affirmation

Having declared that concerning *nirvāṇa* neither existence, nor non-existence, nor both, nor neither can be said, Nāgārjuna closes his “Examination of Nirvāṇa” with the most puzzling passages on indifference:

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence [*saṃsāra*] and *nirvāṇa*.
There is not the slightest difference
Between *nirvāṇa* and cyclic existence [*saṃsāra*].³⁹

This passage must be understood as highly paradoxical, for in the Buddhist context *saṃsāra* is usually conceived as the opposite of *nirvāṇa*. But also note that here they are not claimed to be *identical*: what Nāgārjuna aims at is *indifference*. Garfield suggests that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* should not be imagined as two different places but rather as two different states of mind;⁴⁰ but – to be precise – this cannot be the case either, since where “[t]here is not the slightest [!] difference,” there are neither different states of mind. Accordingly, all explanations concerning the apparent difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* must be understood as merely heuristic devices (*upaya*) preparing the reader for the insight into their absolute in-difference. The following passage will make clear that we are on the right track in this regard:

What is identical and what is different?
What is permanent and what is impermanent?
What is both permanent and impermanent?
What is neither?⁴¹

Here Nāgārjuna even treats of *difference* as ultimately indiscernible from identity, which points to an obvious disagreement with Deleuze. Deleuze, in fact, also discusses indifference in order to develop his idea of difference:

³⁹ Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 331.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

Indifference has two aspects: the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved – but also the white nothingness, the once more calm surface upon which float unconnected determinations like scattered members: a head without a neck, an arm without a shoulder, eyes without brows. The indeterminate is completely indifferent, but such floating determinations are no less indifferent to each other. Is difference intermediate between these two extremes? Or is it not rather the only extreme, the only moment of presence and precision?⁴²

Deleuze differentiates here between “black nothingness” and “white nothingness” in order to conclude that difference in-itself is the “only extreme.” And yet, it is difficult to follow him in the assumption that these two “aspects” of indifference are to be considered *extremes* in the first place and that “presence and precision” are ontologically more relevant than absence and vagueness. Nāgārjuna – after all – teaches the *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* which overall avoids extremes, whereas Deleuze’s critique of indifference does not seem to hold for him. In particular, it must be said that indifference is not *nothingness*, regardless of whether it is black or white. If one had to choose between these two “extremes,” Nāgārjuna’s notion of indifference is “black,” but this ultimately leads us also to indifference between black and white. Deleuze goes on:

Difference is the state in which one can speak of determination *as such*. The difference ‘between’ two things is only empirical, and the corresponding determinations are only extrinsic. However, instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself – and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it.⁴³

Difference, thus, takes the form of “unilateral distinction,”⁴⁴ whereas indifference *remains indifferent even to its ‘own’ differentiation*. We can make good use of this idea in order to make sense of Nāgārjuna’s supposed ‘identification’ of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. On the level of ultimate truths (*paramarthika satya*), ‘there is not the slightest difference’ between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*: they are *indifferent* to each other, not identical. On the level of conventional truths (*loka-samvriti-satya*), there is indeed a difference (i.e. a different state of mind). And yet – and here Deleuze comes in – *nirvāṇa remains indifferent to its ‘own’ differentiation*. In this way, *nirvāṇa* can be conventionally understood as a *different* state of mind in which, however, all differences are overcome, even the “ontological difference”⁴⁵ or difference in-itself. Nāgārjuna, then, can be seen as performing a differential dialectics only for the sake of teaching absolute *indifference*, which in fact is very far from the Hegelian reconciliation of differences in identity.

Deleuze’s critique of indifference fails precisely at this point, namely in the reduction of indifference to what he calls “the undetermined concept”⁴⁶ which belongs to representation. If indifference is conceived merely as *conceptual* indifference, it is indeed reduced to identity, as difference gets reduced to the negative; this is the case in Hegel for whom Being – the first

⁴² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁵ For Deleuze’s discussion of Heidegger’s philosophy of difference see *ibid.*, pp. 64-66.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

concept of his *Logic* – is indifferent but already bears the germ of identity.⁴⁷ But this is not the only way to understand indifference. If difference must be freed from its representation in the concept, *indifference* must be freed as well! Deleuze instead reduces indifference to mere “aspects” of his major concept difference – “black nothingness” and “white nothingness” – with far-reaching implications.

How could one conceive of indifference as an utter affirmation? Indifference is a neglected concept, much more neglected than difference ever was. But what was actually the *reason* for declaring difference affirmative? Let us return to the following passage:

we believe that when these problems [differences] attain their proper degree of *positivity*, and when difference becomes the object of a corresponding *affirmation*, they release a power of aggression and selection which destroys the beautiful soul by depriving it of its very identity and breaking its good will.⁴⁸

Deleuze does not appear to provide us with a reason but we can see that “*positivity*” and “*affirmation*” are ultimately linked to a “power of aggression and selection.” Difference is affirmative because it is *aggressive* and *selective* – in fact, a quite Neo-Darwinist conception of ontology.

Now how about indifference? Far from any cancellation of difference in the concept, non-conceptual, *absolute indifference* is the place which originally *enables* difference to emerge. If indifference is a minimum of difference in degree, it is also a maximum of differences in number. If difference is defined by its aggression and selection, indifference is the primordial field from which difference ‘selects’. Indifference is a neglected concept due to its gloomy conception as a disinterested abyss: this is what the critique against existentialism is all about, as if our miserable morals and our hopes for a ‘lost clarity’ had anything to do with ontological primacy. But what if we could conceive of indifference *ontologically* as an absolute *freedom*, as already Sartre suggests?⁴⁹ Moreover, what if this freedom is not a “condemnation to be free”⁵⁰ but an utter affirmation? Freedom in the sense of Nāgārjuna is in fact very far from the concerns of pessimistic individualism and his thought eventually points to ultimate compassion.

Freedom and Compassion

Absolute indifference is freedom in the sense of an embracing *openness* even to its apparent ‘opposite’ or difference. Following Kant, freedom understood as the absence of constraints is only “negative freedom,” whereas the affirmative idea of freedom lies in its autonomy.⁵¹ Note that Kant is only interested in the freedom of the *will* while our task will be to establish freedom

⁴⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 59.

⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. xx.

⁴⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Sarah Richmond (New York: Washington Square Press/Atria, 2021), pp. 569ff..

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 577

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 52.

on the level of ontology. Furthermore, we are not interested in the establishment of law *per se* (as *nomos* in ‘auto-nomy’) but in the primordial emergence of difference or structure. That is, we are interested in *self-differentiation* rather than in autonomy.

In the framework of unilateral distinction, absolute indifference is indifferent even to its ‘own’ distinctions. Yet from the perspective of the philosophies of difference, difference appears *ex nihilo* – that is, out of the blue – while lacking the insight that this deep blue is not at all ‘nothingness’ but is utterly affirmative qua non-conceptual indifference. It is certainly true that, on the one hand, difference differentiates itself from a ground, while this ground (indifference), on the other, remains indifferent to it. But this is true only on the level of conceptual abstraction. Since difference *arises from the ground* and since this ground remains indifferent to it, the ground *differentiates itself* qua difference.

Deleuze would say that we are still treating difference as a concept, that conceptual indifference is, in this way, ‘identical’ to difference. But we are not saying that indifference is identical to difference; we are saying that it is simply not distinct from it. Deleuze would say that this procedure violates the principle of unilateral distinction, and that in this way difference would not differentiate itself. But it is precisely due to the principle of unilateral distinction that indifference differentiates itself *qua difference*: precisely because difference differentiates itself while indifference remains indifferent to it, we say that indifference *differentiates itself* through difference.⁵²

On the level of ultimate truths (*paramarthika satya*), difference can no longer be considered as strictly separated from indifference but should be understood as its ‘own’ aspect. This sense of self-differentiation can be conceived as a reverse mode of Nāgārjuna’s dialectics which develops from absolute indifference to its differentiation in the world of conventional truths (*loka-samvriti-satya*). Such ‘reversal’ in Mahāyāna Buddhism is not at all uncommon since the latter is highly critical concerning its own notion of “ultimate truths.”⁵³ Indeed, for Nāgārjuna, even emptiness is empty, and his dialectics thus returns to the world of conventional truths, though no longer as a set of abstract ‘givens’ but as dynamically entangled in dependent origination. Nāgārjuna, in this sense, goes one step further than Deleuze by not only questioning identity but also difference as such a ‘given’, while simultaneously embracing both according to the so-called Middle Way (Mādhyamaka).

This sense of freedom – yet again – is not reducible to the freedom of the will; instead we say that *everything is free*, for difference is not absolute but a genuine aspect of indifference. As Schelling notes, it will forever remain a mystery why Kant, after his positive characterization of freedom in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, did not apply it to the things-

⁵² In relation to this, see *Difference and Repetition*, p. 28. For further reading on unilateral distinction and for comparison see an early essay by Alexandre Kojève, *Atheism*, translated by Jeff Love (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018) and especially Kyle Moore, *Presence of Absence: Alexandre Kojève’s Philosophy of In-Existence* (forthcoming). Moore argues that Kojève developed an alternative approach to the beginning of Hegel’s *Logic* identifying in it a non-conceptual ‘nothing’ that precedes both Being and Nothing – an unspeakable silence that underlies the whole development of Spirit.

⁵³ See e.g. Brook A. Zyporin, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: The Lotus Sutra and Tiantai Buddhism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016).

in-themselves.⁵⁴ Schelling – in a way similar to Nāgārjuna – understands freedom in terms of an “absolute indifference”⁵⁵; in his *Berlin Lectures* he even speaks of a non-conceptual ground for the concepts of philosophy.⁵⁶ If we are to understand freedom *ontologically* in terms of a non-conceptual, absolute indifference which differentiates itself, then this freedom is no longer a “condemnation to be free”⁵⁷ but an *affirmative* idea of freedom, a genuine *openness* to difference.

As stated above, indifference is not essentially opposed to difference but it rather embraces it. This genuine notion of *embrace* is not at all a metaphor but is developed philosophically in the latter writings of Nishida Kitarō. Nishida’s notion of place (*basho*) vastly corresponds with Nāgārjuna’s concept of *nirvāṇa*, or of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).⁵⁸ Nishida’s *basho* is a non-conceptual *place* that transcends (or rather ‘subscends’) the dichotomies of thought while simultaneously surrounding – or embracing – them in a circle without a circumference.⁵⁹ In his final essay “The Logic of Place and the Religious Worldview,” Nishida expands on his notion of embrace in terms of ultimate compassion: God, who is ultimately undetermined, creates the world by negating him/herself, by canceling divine indifference for the sake of difference. In reverse, one can only approach God by blurring one’s own boundaries through ultimate compassion.⁶⁰ Indifference, in this sense, takes the form of unrestricted love.⁶¹

Nishida notes that transcendence remains an abstract concept if it is disconnected from its immanence, which brings us back to the principle of unilateral distinction: although indifference remains indifferent to its ‘own’ distinctions, it differentiates itself qua difference; in terms of religion, God thus *sacrifices himself* for the sake of his creation. Nishida concludes that morality or the notion of the God of Judgment is incapable of grasping the true core of all religion, which precedes not only the dichotomy of good and evil but even the dichotomy of

⁵⁴ Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love & Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵⁶ Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 203ff.

⁵⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 577.

⁵⁸ See David Dilworth, “Postscript: Nishida’s Logic of the East,” in Kitarō Nishida, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, translated by David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), pp. 130ff.

⁵⁹ For a thought-provoking overview of Nishida’s works see John W. M. Krummel, *Nishida Kitarō’s Chiasmatic Chorology: Place of Dialectic, Dialectic of Place* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015).

⁶⁰ Kitarō Nishida, “The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview,” in *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), esp. pp. 86-87, 94-95, 100-101, 107-108, 121. For a more critical translation, see also Nishida, “The Logic of Topos and the Religious Worldview,” translated by Michiko Yusa, *The Eastern Buddhist*, XIX No. 2 (1986), pp. 1-29 & XX No. 1 (1987), pp. 81-119.

⁶¹ It is certainly true that we should ‘celebrate the differences’ in terms of sexual orientation, race, and gender. But to truly fall in love is already to blur these differences in the sense of absolute indifference or unrestricted love. Our ambition for ‘equality’ cannot be limited to representation quotas and minority reports but ultimately aims at the overcoming of such political distinctions. To be ‘indifferent’ to sexual orientation, race and gender in this sense is to be political in the most progressive way.

theism and atheism: even the death of God gains a wholly different meaning.⁶² In this sense, the God of Love – who can barely be called ‘God’ at all – is indeed nothing less and nothing more than Nāgārjuna’s notion of *nirvāṇa*. As I have tried to show, this notion may be understood in terms of absolute *indifference*; far from its common nihilistic connotations, this indifference is *freedom* in an ontological sense. The affirmative idea of freedom lies in the notion of *embrace* which culminates in unrestricted *love*.

Conclusion

As we have seen, a cross-cultural parallel may be drawn between Nāgārjuna and Gilles Deleuze based on their similar views of *negation*. Despite their vast cultural distance, both thinkers establish a radical alternative to the logical negations (typically indicated by ‘non-’) by way of indeterminate negations or *difference* (‘not’, ‘(non-)', ‘?-’), which defy the law of the excluded middle. Furthermore, Deleuze – via Nietzsche – argues for the *affirmative* character of difference based on its “power of aggression and selection,”⁶³ which suggests an affirmative reading of *nirvāṇa*, challenging its nihilistic connotations.

Despite the structural similarities between the concepts of *nirvāṇa* and of difference, I have tried to show that Nāgārjuna goes one step further than Deleuze by making use of difference as a heuristic method (*upaya*) that ultimately leads to absolute *indifference*. Deleuze’s critique of indifference, on the other hand, fails in its reduction to a mere conceptual indifference, whereas a *non-conceptual*, absolute indifference is ontologically prior to the ‘clarity’ of difference: it is the primordial field from which difference ‘selects’.

According to Deleuze’s principle of “unilateral distinction,”⁶⁴ difference differentiates itself while indifference remains indifferent to it. However, if we agree that difference rises from the ground of absolute indifference, it is eventually indifference which *differentiates itself* qua difference. This *self-differentiation* inaugurates an affirmative idea of absolute indifference by means of *freedom* and *compassion*, which does not ‘cancel’ difference but literally embraces it. Indifference as freedom in the sense of Schelling is not limited to freedom of the will but expands to an *ontological* freedom which gives place to the whole multiplicity of differences in the world. That is, while Kant’s “negative freedom” consists only in the absence of natural constraints to the will,⁶⁵ absolute indifference as freedom *restricts itself* in order to express itself qua difference. This kenotic self-expression in Nishida’s terms, marks the ontological transition from absolute indifference to differentiated beings. Since indifference in this sense is the *place* from which differences emerge, it literally embraces them in unrestricted *love*.

Although this cross-cultural elaboration of Nāgārjuna’s notion of indifference presents a radical critique of both Nietzsche and Deleuze, it is not actually opposed to their philosophies of difference but rather integrates them into a greater picture in which difference appears as the very expression of indifference. These cross-cultural examples, after all, are meant to show the increasing relevance of Nāgārjuna in contemporary global thought.

⁶² Kitarō Nishida, “The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview,” especially pp. 73ff, 86-87, 96-97, 99-100, 103, 121.

⁶³ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. xx.

⁶⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 52.