



Beyond Absolutes: Convergences and Divergences between Buddhist Philosophy and Postmodern Critique

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Abstract

The history of philosophy has been largely shaped by search for fixed grounds for knowledge, truth, meaning and reality. However, this quest for fixity has been challenged by different philosophers and scholars in different periods of human history. Buddhist philosophy, particularly the Madhyamaka tradition, challenged the notions of permanent self, intrinsic essence, and independent existence through the doctrines of no-self, dependent origination, and emptiness. Likewise, postmodern critics such as Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault questioned universal truths, stable meanings, and autonomous subjectivity by exposing the contingent, relational, and historically constructed nature of knowledge and identity. This article examines the major points of convergence and divergence between these two philosophies originated from greatly varied historical and cultural contexts. It employs a cross-cultural comparative methodology to analyze the shared features and disparities between them. Drawing upon primary Buddhist texts, including Nagarjuna's the Madhyamaka school and early Buddhist discourses, as well as the writings of

Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, it makes a textual and conceptual analysis supported by relevant secondary scholarship. The analysis reveals that though both traditions question foundational assumptions, Buddhist thought locates critique in the context of transformation or liberation, whereas postmodern critique remains as an open-ended and ongoing process of questioning. Buddhist critique intends to discover the path of liberation from suffering through wisdom, compassion and self-discipline. Postmodern critique, on the other hand, centers on the critical investigation of discourse, knowledge and power structures, without pursuing an ultimate emancipatory objective.

Keywords: Anatman, anicca, contingency, deconstruction, subjectivity, *sūnyatā*

Introduction

Most of the history of philosophy has been driven by a quest for permanent grounds for knowledge, truth, authority, identity and reality. The ancient metaphysics sought out timeless substances behind ever-changing phenomena, timeless truths behind subjective beliefs, and a stable self behind changing experiences. From Plato's forms

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to the Aristotelian theory of substance, from Descartes' pursuit of certainty to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, they thought reason could discover certain and permanent truths that could guide our thinking and our behavior; they argued that reason could unlock something permanent, or something unchangeable.

This quest for permanent grounds was strongly challenged in the second half of the twentieth century. Two great world wars, genocides, colonial wars, technological exclusion and extreme political and religious ideologies undermined the belief that reason necessarily brings about progress, truth and understanding. Against this backdrop, postmodern theorists began to question traditional ideas about truth, identity, language, meaning and authority. Jean-François Lyotard called this trend an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (*Postmodern Condition* xxiv), which is to say, a disbelief in large stories that claim to legitimate knowledge or history. Jacques Derrida critiqued the notion of meaning as present or fixed (*Margins* 3-4). He believed that meaning is never completely fixed or fully present in words because it always depends on other words and interpretations, and therefore remains open to change. Michel Foucault demonstrated that human identities are not permanent or timeless, but rather formed by history, through institutions, rules, and power and knowledge structures (*Discipline and Punish* 173). Our identities are shaped by the society, institutions and systems of power and knowledge in which we live, and not by a fixed inner essence.

It is not only these modern thinkers who have embraced such distrust of permanence, fixed identity and inherent essence. In fact, the same kind of distrust was expressed more than two thousand years ago by Buddhist thinkers. The Buddha spoke of concepts such as *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering) and *anātman* (no-self), questioning the idea of fixed essence.

Subsequently, Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka* philosophy refined this in the concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), where all things are empty of *svabhāva*, their own essence (Garfield 39-42). Apparent realities are only caused, conditioned, related, named and interdependent.

For decades, scholars have been interested in comparative studies of Buddhist philosophy and postmodern thought. They have engaged in the discussion of the parallels between Buddhist critiques of essentialism and postmodern challenges to metaphysical foundations, especially as they relate to language, subjectivity and identity. One of the most influential and earliest works is *Derrida on the Mend* by Robert Magliola which suggests that Derridean deconstruction and Buddhist thought are united in their opposition to metaphysical presence. He suggests that Buddhist ideas of emptiness and non-substantiality are seen as useful tools for dealing with deconstruction outside of the tradition of Western philosophy. Likewise, David Loy's essay "The Deconstruction of Buddhism" studies the convergences between Nāgārjuna and Derrida, but, at the same time, warns against simplistic identification of the two traditions (227-35). He argues that both challenge foundationalism, yet Buddhist philosophy remains oriented toward liberation rather than textual indeterminacy.

More in-depth philosophical parallels have been undertaken by other scholars. According to Jan Westerhoff, the rejection of *svabhāva* by *Madhyamaka* is also one of the most developed critiques of metaphysical realism in the world philosophy, but its aims are different from those of the modern poststructuralism. Newman Robert Glass is interested in the conceptual challenges of the relation of Buddhism to postmodern theology and criticism. He contends that while both traditions reject essentialist and esoteric metaphysical convictions, they have different premises regarding meaning, truth, and transcendence (303-10). He

focuses on the “splits and gaps” between Buddhist soteriology and postmodern textuality. These discussions have led to fruitful discourse on issues of the nature of self, identity, and meaning formation.

Despite these important contributions, much of the existing studies tends toward one of the two extremes. Some studies emphasize similarities so strongly that Buddhism is presented as a form of “ancient postmodernism” or Nagarjuna as a forerunner of deconstruction. They overlook the distinct historical, textual, and soteriological contexts of Buddhist philosophy. Other studies stress differences so sharply that meaningful philosophical dialogue between these two streams of thought becomes implausible.

Moreover, many comparative studies are limited to the focus of Nāgārjuna and Derrida, and their relationship—with less attention to other postmodern issues, such as Lyotard's attack on metanarratives and Foucault's analysis of power and the formation of the subject. Consequently, the broader implications of Buddhist philosophy for current discussions on knowledge, identity, the ethics of knowledge production and social critique are not well explored.

This article aims to overcome these shortcomings in three ways. First, it does not only compare Nāgārjuna with Derrida as it is usually done, but also takes into account Lyotard's theory of “metanarratives” and Foucault's formation of the subject. Second, it looks at not only convergences, but also some important differences in the ethical aspects, in praxis, and in the end goal of the philosophical enterprise. Third, it does not view Buddhism as a forerunner to some postmodernism, but takes a dialogical standpoint that respects historical differences and seeks shared ground where the two traditions can illuminate each other.

Thus, the article makes a contribution to comparative philosophy in the sense that it identifies Buddhist philosophy and postmodern critique with a number

of common anti-essentialist and anti-foundational insights while simultaneously showing that they are two different intellectual projects with different methods, aims, and orientations toward ethical action.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative methodology based on textual and conceptual analysis. It is guided by dialogical hermeneutics, an interpretive method that aims at mutual illumination and the understanding of traditions without assimilating one into the conceptual frame of the other. It holds the idea that the philosophical traditions of diverse historical and cultural backgrounds can still be used to engage in an inquiry into fundamental human issues. In doing so, Buddhist notions of *sūnyatā* (emptiness), *anātman* (no-self) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) are explored in their own doctrinal and historical frameworks and then compared to postmodern ideas of deconstruction, contingency, discourse, and anti-foundationalism. The objective of the study is not conceptual equivalence or similarity, but critical dialogue and reciprocal clarification.

The comparative study of these two distinct philosophical traditions is carried out through close textual examination of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are the texts related to teachings of the Buddha and Nagarjuna, as well as the texts that discuss on the major postmodern authors, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard and their notable writings. The secondary sources are the major interpretations of Buddhist teachings and postmodern critique.

The first part of the study is an investigation into the Buddhist concepts of no self, dependent origination, emptiness and the two truths. The second part examines postmodern discourses on language, subjectivity, and metanarratives. Thirdly, it points to the areas of philosophical

convergence including anti-essentialism, anti-foundationalism and relationality. Finally, it discusses important differences relating to ethics, liberation, truth, and philosophical practice.

Buddhism: Questioning the Absolutes

Anātman

The most controversial Buddhist doctrine is anātman (Pāli: anattā), often rendered as "no-self" or "not-self". Many ancient Indian schools believed in an enduring inner essence (in Sanskrit, ātman) that persisted despite bodily transformation and was the essence of personal identity. Upaniṣadic schools, for instance, often identified the self and ultimate reality. The Buddha rejected the idea of a permanent self, describing it as "an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality" (Rahula 51). His denial of an enduring soul is one of his most radical statements.

Rather than a "self", the Buddha explained a person as being constituted by five aggregates (skandhas): form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. They combine to make up what we would ordinarily identify as a person, but none is permanent. In the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the Buddha asks his disciples if bodily form is permanent or impermanent. When they reply him that it is impermanent, he then explains them that what is impermanent and bound up with suffering should not be viewed as "This is mine, this I am, this is my self" (Bodhi 902). This teaching emphasizes that clinging to any of the aggregates as a fixed self leads to misunderstanding and suffering. The same idea is applicable to other aggregates too.

But it does not mean that Buddhism rejects the existence of personhood, responsibility and continuity in ordinary life. Rather, it denies the notion of an independent and permanent essence as an inner self. Mark Siderits argues that Buddhist personal identity is a conceptual construct that arises out of a series of causally linked physical

and mental events, not a physical entity (41-43). The "self" is a practical concept that we use, but on reflection it is not a substantial and enduring entity.

This is an important concept practically because many worldly concerns come from defending our ego-images, fear of death, seeking others' acceptance, feeling insulted, and identification with "I" and "mine". Through non-attachment to these mental representations, Buddhism seeks to reduce fear and clinging. Steven Collins states that the doctrine of no-self is not merely a speculative view, but it is a wise view of "liberating insight" (90). It is not only a theory but a method to minimize attachment and change the nature of the mind. Thus, anātman is both philosophical and therapeutic concept.

In this age of online identities, the concept of anātman is particularly important. Our identities are now often formed by social media profiles, photos, posts, and so on. In this environment, the idea of a fixed inner self is problematic. It invites the question: is the self something that is already there to be found, or do we make it as we go along through our actions and self-presentation?

Anicca and Process

The Buddhist doctrine of no-self is related to anicca which asserts that all phenomena are impermanent. Everything arises from causes and conditions, undergoes change, and eventually passes away. Our bodies age, our feelings change, social structures come and go, ecological systems evolve, and civilizations decline. In this context, Walpola Rahula asserts that confusing the provisional sense of continuity with the permanent is a deep illusion. In his view, what appears to be a fixed and lasting self is actually a changing process made up of temporary conditions (51). So, the concept of impermanence is crucial for understanding the Buddhist notion of truth and reality.

The idea of impermanence is connected to the condition of suffering. The Dhammapada states, "all conditioned things are impermanent" and "craving gives rise to grief" (Fronsdal vv. 277, 216). People suffer because they want things to be stable in an ever-changing world. Humans are naturally drawn to permanence, so we cling to our possessions, identities, relationships and ideas, with the hope of being happy. But as all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, change brings illness, ageing, loss, separation, disappointment and death. Resisting all of them creates suffering. So, suffering is frequently linked to attachment and desire based on ignorance of impermanence in Buddhist texts like the Dhammapada.

Theoretically, impermanence gives rise to a processual view of reality. The world is seen as comprised of processes rather than substances. Reality is best viewed as dynamic, not static. Apparent permanence is the result of the continuity of changing conditions. A flame seems static even while the fuel and fire are in flux. Likewise, a person is continuous through causal connections, not through an immortal soul.

The Buddha himself rejected the idea of a substantial self, stating that "form is not self . . . feeling is not self . . . perception is not self . . . formations are not self . . . consciousness is not self" (Bodhi SN 22.59). Nowadays, this concept is also explained in systems theory, ecology, and neuroscience; they favor understandings of organisms and minds as networks, rather than substances. Some scholars have even pointed out the affinities between this Buddhist analysis and thought of Heraclitus, Hume, Bergson, and Whitehead who also challenged the idea of permanent and unchanging substances.

The concept of impermanence also plays role in shaping ethical conduct; it can promote humility, gratitude and compassion among people. When one realizes that the world is fragile, there is no reason to be arrogant. The awareness

of impermanence does not necessarily lead one to despair. Rather, it can heighten a sense of responsibility and care.

Pratītyasamutpāda

The idea of impermanence accounts for the transient nature of phenomena; the dependent origination, in turn, explains how things arise. Pratītyasamutpāda is a Sanskrit term which is usually translated as the dependent origination; it explains that nothing arises by itself; nothing is produced anywhere without a cause. The Buddha explained it this way: "When this is, that is; with the arising of this, that arises. When this is not, that is not; with the cessation of this, that ceases" (Bodhi 552). It suggests that all phenomena arise because of specific causes and conditions, and they cease when those causes and conditions no longer exist.

This doctrine of dependent origination is defined as the chain of conditioned suffering. Ignorance causes mental formations, these formations cause consciousness, consciousness causes name-and-form, and so on until it results in ageing, death, grief and despair. It shows the impermanent and conditioned nature of existence and how beings continually experience dissatisfaction through attachment. As Harvey explains, life is about "holding on to those we do like, and in getting what we want," but its "changing, unstable nature" means that we will experience "dissatisfaction, loss and disappointment" (Harvey 54). There are variations in how different Buddhist traditions understand this chain, but the core point is that suffering is not random or fated; it has causes and can be eliminated by changing the causes or conditions.

More generally, dependent origination calls into question the notion of complete independence. There is no thing that can exist out of the system. There is no language without people; no economy functions without people, work and institutions; no individual exists without memory, body,

and connections to others. To be is to be dependent on a lot of things. This idea comes at the expense of extreme individualism and of substances as permanent and independent.

The dependent origination offers an explanation of suffering, grounds ethical responsibility, and undermines the notion of an independent self. As Gethin explains, Buddhist causality is based on the maxim, “this existing, that exists; this arising, that arises; this not existing, that does not exist; this ceasing, that ceases” (141). This line is often quoted to express the idea of interdependence of all things, the foundation of dependent origination.

Ethically, this doctrine emphasizes responsibility. Because actions create the future conditions, karma should not be understood as fate, but rather the cause-and-effect principle of ethical life. Socially, it suggests that inequality and privilege often arise from systemic or structural causes, not coincidences. Ecologically, it is consistent with contemporary views that we are all interdependent in a web of life.

Śūnyatā in Nāgārjuna

The second century philosopher, Nāgārjuna, was the key figure of the Madhyamaka school, who took the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination to a more profound level. His concept of śūnyatā suggests that all things (physical objects, mental states, ideas) lack independent, permanent, or self-existing essence (svabhāva). Everything is conditioned by causes and conditions, so nothing has svabhāva, an independent essence. If something were to be by its own nature, it would be self-sufficient; it would be timeless, independent and unconditioned. But whatever depends on causes cannot be self-grounded. He puts this point in his most often cited verse:

Whatever is dependently arisen,
That is explained to be emptiness.
This, since it is dependently designated,
Is itself the middle way. (Garfield 304)

Nāgārjuna does not imply that things do not really exist, but they exist in a relative and conditional manner, not in absolute or independent sense. Śūnyatā (emptiness) does not mean there is nothing. It means that things are empty of intrinsic essence. They are conventionally real, practically useful, and causally efficient, but they are not substantively real. A table exists as wood, work, form, function, name and social acceptance, but it doesn't have an eternal "tableness".

This is a common argument in Nāgārjuna. He asks about cause and effect, movement, time, the self, and binary concepts like existence and non-existence. If cause and effect are the same, there is no cause. If they are wholly distinct, there can be no connection. If motion is independent of a mover and path, contradiction results. He argues that cause and effect do not exist with their own svabhāva, that is, that they are independent and self-sufficient entities (Westerhoff 94). A cause is meaningful only in relation to its effect, and an effect arises only through its cause and other conditions.

By talking about emptiness of things, Nagarjuna is not trying to establish a new philosophical system. He just intends to dismantle rigid conceptual view of inherent existence of things – a rejection of attachment to all fixed views. As Garfield states, “For whomever emptiness is a view / That one will accomplish nothing” (212). Thus, emptiness itself is not meant to be adopted as a doctrine; it works instead as an antidote to conceptual fixation, not as another object of attachment.

Nāgārjuna is interpreted today as a skeptic, pragmatist, anti-realist, dialectician or transcendental critic. His teaching is best construed as denying intrinsic existence while protecting everyday reality and morality. He stands as a forceful opponent of substance metaphysics, no matter how he is labelled.

Two Truths Doctrine

To avoid *sūnyatā* being misunderstood as a form of nihilism, Madhyamaka philosophy proposes the doctrine of two truths: *saṃvṛti-satya* (conventional truth) and *paramārtha-satya* (ultimate truth). Conventional truth is the world we live in - language, persons, things, institutions, moral norms, and so forth. Ultimate truth refers to the emptiness of these phenomena, which means that they are without inherent nature (Garfield 296-99). Phenomena have practical reality at the conventional level, but they do not have any fixed independent nature; they exist only dependently.

These two truths do not talk about completely two different worlds. Ultimate truth is not some metaphysical other world beyond our experience. Instead, it is a glimpse of the provisional nature of conventional realities of this world. The ultimate comprehension of a chair is not a finding of its 'chair-substance', but a realization that "chair" is reliant on parts, function, naming and perspective. Communication and moral life would break down in the present world without conventional truth. We still need to know the difference between medicine and poison, justice and injustice, teacher and student, suffering and relief. Nāgārjuna clearly explains that if there is no conventional truth, there is no ultimate truth, and if there is no ultimate truth, there is no *nirvāṇa* (Garfield 298). Madhyamaka, therefore, does not deny the conventional truth; rather it presents the truth as the basis for understanding ultimate truth and getting liberation.

Subsequent Madhyamaka figures like Candrakīrti explained that conventional practices are still legitimate as long as they are not confused with absolute realities. So, the two truths doctrine is a compromise between realism and anti-realism, neither eternalism ("things have essence") nor nihilism ("nothing matters"). It takes a middle position on how things exist and how we know them.

The two truths doctrine is still relevant today because it explains how the conventionally valid and meaningful fields of science, law, and morality can be valid and meaningful without having ultimate or independent existence. It enables us to appreciate the usefulness of human knowledge and social institutions without assuming that they have an absolute and secure basis.

Soteriological Aim

Another characteristic of Buddhist philosophy is that it is always connected to the idea of human suffering and salvation. Philosophy can be speculative in many traditions. In Buddhism, this is never the case. It does not start with an abstract theory of being, but with the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its origin, its end, and the path to its end (Rahula 16). The concepts of no-self, impermanence and emptiness are not just philosophical claims; they are pragmatic means to avoid greed, hatred, delusion and attachment. One could not think that no-self is true, and still cling to the ego. The wisdom must be practical and change the way we live, view and respond.

This is why Buddhism combines philosophy with ethics (*śīla*), meditation (*śamādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*). Mindfulness trains attention. Meditation calms the mind. Compassion weakens self-centeredness. Wisdom shows the emptiness of phenomena. Buddhism integrates worldview with spiritual practice rather than treating it merely as a theory (Harvey 67-83). It directly supports practical transformation of human life; it is therapeutic, existential and practical as well as intellectual. It claims that the wisdom of the intellect should help to alleviate suffering and develop an awakened way of life.

**Postmodern Critique: Undermining
Metanarratives and Absolutes**

Lyotard and the Death of Metanarratives

One of the most important figures associated with postmodernism is a famous French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, largely because of his characterization of postmodernity as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (*The Postmodern Condition* xxiv). He refers to metanarratives as grand narratives that explain and justify institutions, history and knowledge. These include the Enlightenment faith in reason and progress, Marxist faith in emancipation through class struggle, and the faith in humanity's progress through science. These stories not only explain things, they make authority, power, leadership or institutions seem legitimate.

Lyotard's point was made in response to late modern societies, which were capitalist and technologically mediated. Knowledge was fractured, monetized and specialized. Specialized scientific disciplines no longer formed a coherent world and political philosophies often failed to deliver their promises. The twentieth century's wars, genocides and bureaucratic massacres also eroded confidence in history led by reason.

He argues that, rather than a single legitimating discourse, there are multiple language games (selectively drawing on Wittgenstein). Different language games govern science, law, art, religion, politics, and ordinary conversation, and operate according to different rules and criteria. None can be judged by the same authority (9-13). This means that truth and meaning depend on the specific context in which language is used.

His emphasis on plurality has greatly changed the meaning of political discourse. Universalizing narratives tend to exclude minorities in the name of universal truth. He, therefore asks for the need of special attention to the differend, situations where there is injustice because someone's voice is silenced by the dominant discourse of

the other (*The Differend* xi-xiii). Here, postmodern critique becomes ethical because it helps protect the voice of the unspeakable.

But he has been accused of exaggerating fragmentation or weakening the continuing power of capitalism as a quasi-metanarrative. In this context, Fredric Jameson argues that postmodernity is a cultural expression of late capitalism, rather than merely a state of multiple language games (1-6). Nevertheless, Lyotard's contribution to postmodernism remains significant because he exposed the fragility of narratives that present themselves as universal truth.

Comparatively, Lyotard's mistrust of totalizing systems parallels Buddhist caution against attachment to fixity. But Buddhism often makes a distinction between liberating view and dogmatism, while Lyotard is suspicious of universals.

Derrida and Deconstruction

Another famous French philosopher connected with postmodern critique is Jacques Derrida, but his idea of deconstruction is often misinterpreted as destruction, disorder or chaos. It indeed suggests a very precise method of reading or interpreting texts and other systems of meaning to detect internal inconsistencies or contradictions, exclusions, instabilities and shaky premises within the systems that claim coherence, truth, or stable meanings.

His early writings critique the Western privileging of presence – immediacy, origin, self-identity, and transparent meaning (*Of Grammatology* 7-14). In his view, the Western thought always looks for a fixed meaning to avoid doubt or uncertainty. The central concept in his critique is 'différance', a term coined by himself to explain how meaning in language is never fixed or final; it carries the double meanings of 'differing' and 'deferring' at the same time. Meanings arise as signs differ from each other, and, at the same time, meanings are deferred because one sign points to the other and

other in contexts, rather than reaching at the final ultimate meaning (*Margins* 3-12). Language therefore functions relationally rather than substantively.

Deconstruction criticizes Western metaphysics by showing that it is built on binary oppositions (hierarchies of paired concepts): speech/writing, male/female, mind/body, presence/absence, nature/culture, truth/illusion. One side of the pair is favored as superior over the other, and the hierarchy is considered natural and stable (*Of Grammatology* 144-46). Derrida challenges this idea by revealing that the preferred superior term depends on the inferior for its meaning and cannot, therefore, exist independently; the hierarchy can never be fixed or natural, and neither term can fully dominate the other. Speech is usually valued more highly than writing, but it also relies on repetition, absence and mediation, which are usually characteristic of writing (55-56). He deconstructs rigid hierarchies and shows how meaning is produced through interdependence and difference rather than fixed oppositions.

Derrida does not claim that meaning is never possible or any interpretation is acceptable. His point is that meaning still exists, but it is not fixed, absolute, or final. It depends on context, interpretation, and the relationships between words, rather than on a single permanent truth. In Christopher Norris's view, deconstruction does not deconstruct the meaning, but shows contradictions or what is excluded or ignored in systems of thought (23-24). This helps us understand texts and ideas in a more careful and critical way.

Both Derrida and Nāgārjuna reject self-grounded concepts, their settings are radically different. Derrida focuses on language and textual meaning, but Nāgārjuna deals with Buddhist concerns of causation, suffering and liberation.

Foucault and Subject Formation

The third key figure associated with postmodern thought is a French historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault. He revolutionized modern thinking by demonstrating that power is not just exercised by rulers, governments or laws. Equally, it operates through social institutions, norms, practices, habits and knowledge which shape how people behave and think about themselves. Rather than asking what timeless human nature is, Foucault asks how various kinds of subjectivity (self) are created by social practices. In his view, the self is not something natural or fixed; it is not the starting point (cause), but rather the result (effect) of social forces, knowledge systems, and power relations. In other words, he is interested in how society shapes identity and subjectivity.

In *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things*, Foucault demonstrates how institutions and epistemic regimes create categories like insanity, illness, rationality and humanity. He says "man is a recent invention" to show that the modern human is a historical invention, not an essential reality (*The Order of Things* 386). What seems to be self-evident in one era is lost in another. He develops this theme in *Discipline and Punish* with the discussion of prisons, schools, armies, hospitals, factories. These places discipline human beings by watching, assessing, normalizing and self-disciplining (170-83). They gradually learn to control their own behavior according to social rules and expectations.

In *The History of Sexuality*, he disagrees with idea that modern society represses sexuality by silencing it. He argues that the modern power works through various discourses. Modern institutions like medicine, psychiatry, education, religious confession and state administration do not directly prohibit discussion of sex, but they invite people to speak about sex in "controlled" ways. These discourses are

used to learn, categorize and control sexual behaviors. Power does not simply ban sexuality, it creates forms of knowledge and identity through designation, definition, and control of people's desires (53-73). The use of "the homosexual" as a term for a sexual identity is thus not a timeless and natural classification, but historically specific construction.

Foucault's idea of decentered self is often compared to Buddhism. But his account departs from Buddhist no-self. Buddhism explains how clinging to the ego or self causes suffering, whereas Foucault describes the production of subjects (selves) in historical systems of power and knowledge. One is ethical and experiential; the other is historical and political.

Contingency and Anti-Foundationalism

Despite their differences, many postmodern thinkers are anti-foundational. They doubt that there can be final foundations for truth, morality, language or identity. Rather than necessity of things, they stress on contingency. Things are not fixed, necessary, or naturally given. Social beliefs, institutions, and identities are not inevitable or fixed, but are historical and cultural products that might have been different. They emphasize that what we often take as universal or permanent is actually contingent and historically constructed.

Richard Rorty captures this theme in his concept of the "contingency of language" (9). He argues that languages are historical tools rather than the mirrors of nature. There is no meta-language which is common to all from which final decisions can be made. Human beings learn languages and use them to shape their understanding of themselves.

Derrida rejects the idea of origins and foundations. Meaning depends on differential conditions rather than self-present origin. Foucault shows that truths emerge from historically contingent power/knowledge structures. Lyotard opposes the belief that a master narrative justifies and

legitimizes smaller narratives. All these ideas undermine certainty or stability of things.

Postmodernism is often criticized for promoting relativism or nihilism. But postmodernists differentiate between the denial of absolute foundations and denial of all judgements. One can still argue for justice, against domination, or for democracy without being sure about the eternal truth. Linda Hutcheon points out that postmodernism often mixes anti-foundationalism and political commitment (26-31). This shows that denying absolute truths does not mean denying moral or political responsibility.

Anti-foundationalism can be emancipatory too. If identities and institutions are historical and not natural, they can be transformed. Institutions like patriarchy, racism, colonialism and heteronormativity can become unnecessary and avoidable. Comparatively, postmodern contingency is similar to Buddhist anti-essentialism. But Buddhism typically combines anti-essentialism with ethical and meditative change, while postmodernism can be confined to discourse, politics and history.

Intersections and Resonances

Rejection of Essence

One of the major areas of overlap between Buddhist thought and postmodernism is their shared critique of essence. Many metaphysical systems presume that things have some intrinsic nature. Both traditions question this kind of assumption. Nāgārjuna claims that dependent things can't have intrinsic nature. Derrida demonstrates that meaning depends on difference and relations, not presence. In Foucault's view, sexuality, which is generally understood as a natural given, is not a natural reality, but historically formed by discourse and power (60-66). In this respect, a supposedly natural phenomenon is exposed as being historically contingent

and socially constructed. In both cases, what appears to be natural is shown to be contingent, relational or constructed.

Nāgārjuna argues that treating concepts as ultimately real traps people in suffering, so overcoming this habit helps achieve liberation. Derrida examines philosophical texts to show how they depend on hidden assumptions and oppositions that exclude alternative meanings. Foucault investigates how ideas presented as natural or self-evident are often used to justify and maintain systems of power. In this way, although all three reject essentialism.

Decentering the Self

Both traditions reject the notion of a sovereign self that has been prominent in modern philosophy. Buddhism dissects the person into transitory aggregates and rejects an enduring ego or self. Postmodernism doubts the sovereign self as the originator of meaning and actions.

For Buddhism, attachment to a permanent self or ego causes desire, fear, pride and suffering. The problem is attachment to the self. Foucault does not think the self is an illusion, but that it is socially constructed by norms, institutions and disciplines. The problem is historical formation of the self. Derrida rejects the philosophical idea of pure self-presence by showing that thought and meaning are formed through linguistic mediation rather than direct presence (*Writing and Difference* 280–87). All three perspectives question the idea of a fixed, independent self, though they explain it differently.

Buddhism aims at freeing the individual from their identification with the self through meditation and moral practice, while postmodern theory looks to the critical awareness of the construction of the subject position. One is directed towards the release from clinging, the other towards the unveiling of autonomy. In this era of social media, both philosophies are relevant because online information is heavily

influenced by algorithms, and there is need for continuous questioning of self.

Language, Truth, and Representation

Language plays significant role in both philosophies. Nāgārjuna uses language to show inconsistencies when concepts are made absolute. He doesn't reject everyday language, but denies that words capture fixed inner realities. Words function at the conventional level, not the ultimate level (Garfield 296-305). Language is useful in everyday communication but not as a source of absolute truth.

Derrida draws a similar conclusion from contemporary linguistics and philosophy. Signs only have meaning because of their differences, so language can't provide pure or ultimate presence (*Of Grammatology* 30–44). Meaning can be reproduced in different contexts and will continue to be reinterpreted. Therefore, meaning is always shifting and never completely fixed.

Lyotard adds that different language games have different criteria of validity. The notion of "true" and "valid" is dependent upon context. Science, morality, art and politics do not converge in a single type of discourse (*The Postmodern Condition* 9-17). There are distinct rules, standards and judgments for each of these areas. Foucault's approach is that institutions create truth; it is not the same as the values of morality or art. He claims that the concept of truth is socially constructed and reinforced by discourses developed by social institutions, such as the educational system, the medical system, and the government.

Neither tradition actually intends to avoid the truth completely. Buddhism shows the difference between conventional and ultimate truth. Postmodern thinkers tend to rethink the concept of truth as situational, procedural, contestable, or historical. They both reject the naïve representationalism – the notion that language is a mirror of an independent reality. Both points are vital in an era of misinformation, in which certainty

and cynical skepticism thrive. They warn of dogmatic certainty and cynical denialism by suggesting reflexive attention to the production, justification and limitation of truths.

Anti-Dogmatism

A further intersection is clearly noticed in their resistance to anti-dogmatism. The Buddhist texts warn against rigid adherence to views. In the Kālāma Sutta, the Buddha counsels people not to believe what they hear from tradition, scripture, rumor or authority, but to test it carefully and see the results (Bhiku SN 3.65). This advice is later refined by Madhyamaka, which reveals contradictions in fixed metaphysical stances.

Postmodernism also questions systems of fixed authority. Lyotard criticizes metanarratives. Derrida doubts closed systems that deny difference. Foucault reveals how the truth claim can be a technique of power. Buddhism frequently critiques false views for the sake of liberating truth. It does not consider all views to be equally valid. Some views are more relieving of suffering than others. Postmodernism may be more reluctant to adopt any absolute teaching. However, both advocate humility. Knowledge is finite, conditioned and prone to idolatry. Injurious certainty is that which excludes. This anti-dogmatic sensibility is very much needed in modern societies in which most people are polarized. It promotes conviction in the light of self-criticism.

Relational Reality

The most profound commonality is in the sense of 'relationality'. Buddhism speaks of dependent origination: events are caused and conditioned, and mutually depend on each other. Nothing is absolutely independent. Self is dependent on body, language, memory, environments, and communities. Postmodern theories dismiss the concept of independence.

Meaning depends on relations among signs. Subjectivity relies on discursive and institutional arrangements. Societal identities are located in networks of power, history and representation.

These perspectives challenge possessive individualism and the atomism of metaphysics. The notion of the "self-made man" is put into question with the recognition of relational conditions. However, the nature of relationality is varied within each tradition. Interdependence is frequently the basis of compassion in Buddhism: caring for others is a caring for oneself since they are interconnected. In postmodern theory, relationality is frequently the basis for critique: identities are built by power and thus need to be politically questioned. Relational thinking is essential today for ecology, public health, economics and digital networks.

Divergences and Tensions

Liberation or Endless Critique

Despite the important convergences, there are some fundamental differences between Buddhist philosophy and postmodern critique, particularly with respect to their ultimate orientation. Buddhist philosophy locates its inquiry in the soteriological context of liberation. Its analysis of self, causation and emptiness is meant to lead to awakening, not simply an intellectual practice. This is evident in the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of its cause, the truth of its cessation, and the truth of liberating path.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, remains within the limits of critique. Lyotard rejects legitimating stories, Derrida disorients metaphysical certainties and Foucault unmasks institutional power and contingent truths. Though these observations are influential and politically important, they don't usually point towards a common goal like Nirvāṇa of Buddhism. Their value often lies in keeping closure open or disrupting hierarchies, not in prescribing

final liberation. As a consequence, some authors like Jürgen Habermas claim that the anti-foundational approach how postmodern skepticism developed by Nietzsche and Heidegger ultimately undermines the normative foundations of critique (130–45). While this critique may not be entirely fair, it shows a gesture to a problem.

But Buddhism links critique to action. It doesn't not only critique illusion but also perception, behavior and emotion. While postmodernism is excellent at diagnosing problems in society, power, language, or culture, Buddhism more explicitly offers a form of therapy.

Ethics

A further point of difference relates to ethics. Buddhism has a clear ethical code emphasizing right view, right action, right speech, right livelihood, non-violence, fraternity, kindness, generosity and mindfulness (Harvey 83-89). These ethics are not based on divine command. They are based on an understanding of causal relations: acts motivated by greed, hatred and delusion cause suffering. Thus, in Buddhism, ethics assists liberation.

Postmodernism is often criticized for not having unified moral framework. Postmodern thinkers are suspicious of universal moral rules, so they avoid basing ethics on permanent or timeless principles. But this does not imply they reject ethics completely. Derrida discusses Levinas's ethical notions of hospitality, responsibility, forgiveness and justice beyond a set of legal rules (*Adieu* 18-28). Foucault conceives ethics as practices of self-creation (*Use of Pleasure* 25-32). It is the practice of shaping oneself, not simply following moral rules set by society. However, these postmodern ethical concepts are less formalized and less systematic than Buddhist ethics.

Pragmatically speaking, Buddhism has better practices for long-term character formation and compassion training, whereas postmodern ethics is more sensitive to

"blind spots" in moral systems.

Nihilism and Misunderstanding

Both philosophies are often accused of nihilism, but each rejects the accusation in a different way. Nāgārjuna refutes the interpretation of his idea of emptiness as nothing. In his view, emptiness does not mean that things do not exist, but it means that they are not permanent and independent. Causes and effects still work, suffering and compassion still matter, and language still functions (Garfield 304–05). Derrida is often criticized for deconstruction which is mistakenly taken to mean that all interpretations are equally valid or that truth does not exist. Derrida does not agree with this assertion. He argues that meaning is never completely fixed because it depends on context, leaving open the possibility of differing interpretations (*Limited Inc.* 115–23). Thus, Buddhism denies nihilism by asserting that phenomena don't have an independent existence, but still have a conventional existence through dependent origination, and Derrida rejects it by arguing that meaning depends on context and difference rather than on a fixed or absolute foundation.

These misconceptions persist because people assume that there are only two possibilities: either absolute truths or absolute nothingness. However, neither Buddhism nor postmodernism accepts this either-or frame work. Instead, they both reject the idea of fixed and permanent truths without concluding that everything is meaningless or that nothing exists.

Praxis

The difference between the two thoughts is evident in praxis - putting theoretical ideas into practice. Buddhist philosophy is expressed through the practices, such as meditation, ritual, monastic discipline, chanting, mindfulness, devotional acts, ethical precepts, and communal training. Knowledge is cultivated through training

of the mind and conduct, not only by conceptual argument (Gethin 163-80). This shows that, in Buddhism, philosophy is learned through both understanding and practice.

By comparison, postmodern thought is more frequently found in the activities like critical reading, writing, in genealogies, in institutional critique, in pedagogy and in political engagement. Foucault's later interest in the "technologies of the self" comes closer to embodied practices of self-transformation (16–24) although they differ in aims and methods of Buddhist contemplative practices.

In terms of praxis, Buddhism has been adapted into psychotherapy and mindfulness movements and wellness culture whereas postmodernism has been applied in literary studies, cultural theory, gender studies, political critique and historiography. Thus, the two traditions are expressed through different forms of practice.

Truth Frameworks

Buddhist and postmodern approaches to truth vary greatly. The Madhyamaka approach holds the doctrine of two truths: conventional and ultimate truth. Conventional truth suggests everyday functioning, language, empirical regularities, and moral distinctions. Ultimate truth is the emptiness of all phenomena- the absence of inherent existence (Garfield 296-299). This truth framework allows practical efficacy without absolute metaphysical certainties: drugs can cure, promises can be kept, compassion can save.

Postmodernists are more cautious about fixed hierarchies of truth. Foucault speaks of "regimes of truth" and how certain institutions decide what is true (*Power/Knowledge* 132). Lyotard speaks of a multiplicity of language games, and Derrida rejects the possibility of closure, while allowing for provisional truth. Buddhism, therefore, provides a plural account of truth, while postmodernism provides an historical

account of the production of truth claims. One warns against cynical relativism, the other against spiritual dogmatism.

Conclusion

Both Buddhist philosophy and postmodern critique attack on absolutes. Buddhist doctrines of no-self, emptiness and dependent origination challenge the notions of fixed identity and intrinsic being. Postmodern critiques of metanarratives, presence, and sovereign subjectivity of postmodernism reveal the fragility of conceptual and institutional foundations.

There are some clear differences between these critiques, but they can still be instructive. Buddhism is a way to become free from the suffering through compassion, contemplation, and ethical practice. Postmodernism speaks against domination, exclusion, and historical amnesia. It asks how power works and how closure can be resisted, but Buddhism poses the question of how suffering ends.

The comparative analysis of these thoughts still holds a significant place in the contemporary scholarship. Buddhism offers a system of values and ethics that focus on impermanence, interrelatedness, compassion and moderation. Postmodernism helps us to look at how knowledge and truth is constructed in society, history and politics. Together, they nurture humility, relational sensibility and challenging dogmatism in an uncertain world. Both keep us humble, relational and non-dogmatic. This doesn't mean that the encounter between these two traditions of thought must end in complete agreement or polemic. Its great benefit lies in reciprocal illumination – each tradition reveals what the other tends to neglect.

In an age marked of disintegration, ecological crisis, cultural clashes and identity struggle, this kind of analysis is not just academic, it is urgently practical. It provides conceptual and ethical tools to engage with these global challenges by questioning anthropocentric assumptions,

highlighting interdependence, and inviting the readers to reflect on dominant social and cultural narratives.

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