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A Process Conception of Nature:
A Comparative Study of Hua-yen Buddhism and Whiteheadian Thought

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of Philosophy
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Philosophy

By
Kia Shahideh
May 2021

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Abstract

The primary motivation for this study will be to propose a nature ethic inspired by a belief of deep ecology, and nestled within an a metaphysical representation of the world as presented by process metaphysics and Mahayana Buddhist doctrine. This research will be exploring various applications of Whiteheadian process metaphysics, as well as Mahayana Buddhist ontology to establish a solidified metaphysical platform to further expand to include humans and the natural world on the same plane of being. Upon this platform, Hua-yen Buddhist thought, existing as a subset of Mahayana Buddhism, will be brought into dialogue with its interconnected cosmology to accentuate the implications of the proposed metaphysical notions towards human orientation regarding nature. After an analysis and exploration of the potential critiques of the proposed framework, the practicalities regarding reaching an understanding regarding this altered awareness and the resulting consequences of how individuals perceive their relation to the natural world will be formulated toward a holistic and organismic nature ethic.

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I. Chapter 1: Introduction

The primary motivation for this study will be to propose a nature ethic inspired by a belief of deep ecology, and nestled within an a metaphysical representation of the world as presented by process metaphysics and Mahayana Buddhist doctrine. This research will be exploring various applications of Whiteheadian process metaphysics, as well as Mahayana Buddhist ontology to establish a solidified metaphysical platform to further expand to include humans and the natural world on the same plane of being. Upon this platform, Hua-yen Buddhist thought, existing as a subset of Mahayana Buddhism, will be brought into dialogue with its interconnected cosmology to accentuate the implications of the proposed metaphysical notions towards human orientation regarding nature. After an analysis and exploration of the potential critiques of the proposed framework, the practicalities regarding reaching an understanding regarding this altered awareness and the resulting consequences of how individuals perceive their relation to the natural world will be formulated toward a holistic and organismic nature ethic.

The contents of the following research are broken up into three distinct chapters, chapters two through four, each building upon the previous. For the introduction, I will outline the layout for the rest of the thesis and introduce the core concepts being discussed.

Chapter 2 will use Whitehead's process metaphysics as found in *Process and Reality* and the fundamental philosophical pillars of Mahayana Buddhism in tandem to re-emphasize a renewed comparative source of metaphysical understanding. This will include concepts such as 'actual entities,' 'prehensions,' 'nexus,' and 'concrecence,' as well as emptiness. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, a crucial text for Mahayana understanding, will be

intertwined with Process philosophy within the scope of this chapter, bringing together Eastern and Western schools in a constructive evaluation.

In Chapter 3, I will transition into a further microcosm of the grander metaphysical analysis regarding the specificities of the relational existence of humans and the natural environment. The introduced comparative metaphysical framework will be applied towards the environment to demonstrate nature as existing in an inseparable state from humans. This venture will be specifically drawing on concepts found in Hua-yen Buddhism such as ‘Indra’s net’ to bring to light the Buddhist perspective of ‘interconnectivity.’ Hua-yen Buddhism will be further used here as a focusing mechanism to detail the ontological consequences of both humans and the natural world such as ‘metaphysical dependence’ and ‘plural relationality.’ Modern ecology will be utilized in this section to further demonstrate the web of interdependencies that exist between organisms and their environments. To further illuminate and highlight this perspective, this chapter will also contain a cultural comparison regarding how certain Western ideologies perceive the natural world, and how this makes itself known through art. Before proceeding to the last chapter of a construction towards a nature ethic, charges will be cleared of Hua-yen Buddhism existing in an fully egalitarian state which seemingly takes no consideration for worldly conflict. This final step will be done to allow room for further moral conversation within the scope of Hua-yen and Mahayana Buddhism.

With the metaphysical expansion towards the natural world in place, in chapter four I will look to further build upon a nature ethic which focuses on the inclusion of humans within the realm of ecological processes, and the necessary conditions that may stem from that placement. This final examination towards a nature ethic is inspired by a notion of ‘deep ecology’ which suggests that a fundamental shift in individual attitudes and consciousness is necessary to resolve

the environmental crisis that increasingly pervades our lives. The suggestion that will be made is the rebirth of a new type of language and way of being that may be necessary to successfully address environmental challenges pressed upon us. A central tool which will be utilized here, drawing from the previous chapter, is the concept of human's existing as relational beings, and expanding this relationality beyond the rigid boundaries of human society to include the world around. With inspiration from 'care ethics,' these relationalities between individuals and the surrounding world will be given their due importance when regarding any form of ethical deliberation as well as a further recommendation that one acts with 'compassion' towards these relationalities. To this end, I will also constructively bring into conversation feminist care ethics through Carol Gilligan and Vrinda Dalmiya and expand this comparative dialogue to environmental care. I will be utilizing the work of process ecofeminists, Jea Sophia Oh and Catherine Keller to create a moral ontology where the individual is enmeshed in a moral relationality to the other with/in a more-than-human world as an extended symbiotic community of the earth. The last section will draw on Thich Nhat Hanh and will engage in a discussion regarding the practicalities of reaching the explicated states of consciousness in order to construct an eco-care ethic of compassion.

II. Chapter 2: The Metaphysical World through Mahayana Buddhism and Process Thought

Mountains do not lack the qualities of mountains. Therefore they always abide in ease and always walk. You should examine in detail this quality of the mountain's walking. Mountains' walking is just like human walking. Accordingly, do not doubt mountains walking even though it does not look the same as human walking. The Buddha ancestors' words point to walking. This is fundamental understanding. You should penetrate these words.- Dogen¹

The project to successfully construct a theory regarding the true nature of reality has proven itself to be an elusive and challenging endeavor. A theory regarding the nature of existence may be suggested to take a fluid and ungraspable form due to a critical fact that no such adequate answer has been successfully reached to stand the test of time. One could be justified to say that this project towards metaphysics, in it of itself, is a process with no clear and distinct end. It also seems rather unlikely that any one school or philosopher would have all the solutions to this problem which has persisted in penetrating and perplexing human thought for millennia. This is why in an attempt to establish a comparative metaphysical framework, I will draw upon philosophies from multiple areas of belief, dispersed throughout history and separated by continents. I believe that this provided diversity in both perspective and temporality will assist in the creation of a more holistic picture that does not depend on one specialized school of thought.

¹ Dōgen and Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Moon in a dewdrop* (North Point Press, 1995), Bibliographies Non-fiction, 97-98.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=cat07743a&AN=wculc.995245107003573&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s3916018>.

With the following construction, an intrinsic element within itself it's the transient nature of all things, here I pose that this operating framework also exhibits this same trait.

This chapter will be looking to construct and support metaphysical claims of reality from that standpoint of Mahayana Buddhism² drawing on Nagarjuna as well as Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism.³ The chapter will explore the notions of process and impermanence as well as emptiness and lack of substance from both of the given perspectives. The first section will explore the terminology and language used in Whiteheadian Process philosophy to provide an introduction to this mode of thought. The second section will expand upon the concepts found within the first and bring into dialogue the work of Nagarjuna to work towards a comparative construction. The primary concepts that will be waded through will be shown to have great overlap and complimentary value with one another. Such models will include that of dependent arising, inseparable connectivity, as well as a continued and dynamic sense of becoming. In the process of weaving together these philosophies, a critical analysis will also take place regarding the fundamental differences of each of these schools. Using Steve Odin's *Process Metaphysics and Hua-yen Buddhism*, there will be a discussion of 'interpenetration' vs. 'cumulative penetration,' and how each identifies the temporal aspect regarding their metaphysical claims to honor each as separate ideologies as well as grant further understanding as to how they may successfully and coherently come together. Upon

² One of the two major forms of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism arose during the turn of 1st Century CE in India and is known as the "Great Vehicle" tradition, as it encourages the path of bodhisattva. Nagarjuna was an Indian Mahayana Buddhist thinker known to be the founder of the Madhyamaka, or middle way school of Buddhist philosophy found within the Mahayana as well as his teaching regarding the concept of *sunyata* (Sanskrit; *Śūnyatā* meaning "Emptiness" or "Voidness").

³ 'The philosophy of organism' is a type of process philosophy that seeks to present a metaphysical ideology that draws away from the ideas of dualism, materialism, and idealism. Proposes entities exist as structures of activity as opposed to inert beings.

constructively weaving these ontological perspectives, certain limitations of such a view will be also be presented and explored.

1. Process Philosophy

The first section of this chapter will be exploring the key notions that are found to be re-occurring themes through the philosophy of organism. The primary aim of this relatively fresh metaphysical perspective, as conceived by Alfred North Whitehead, is to shift the metaphysical conversation away from static entities existing isolated in space, and move towards a connected and ephemeral state of being. The static mode of being can be considered to be the primary mode of metaphysical thought which has existed in dominant fashion over Western philosophy, specifically that of atomism and substance metaphysics. A possible limitation of these previous metaphysics that will be referenced later in this work is the deconstruction of nature into mechanistic component parts which can be manipulated and controlled. Philosophy of organism puts forward the model of entities operating within structures of continuous activity that take no direct form in either the mental or the physical, nor are constituted of micro building blocks that persist in unchangeable states. Here, the nature of each of the stated entities reflects its relations to the larger structure its embedded within, and is to be best understood through these relationalities as opposed to its own intrinsic essence.

I will now explore some of the key language and terminology discussed in *Process and Reality* to establish a base of understanding. Chapter 2 of *Process and Reality* establishes a ‘categorical scheme’ which provides language that can be used to better understand the core

philosophies being discussed of connectivity and becoming. These terms will be relevant in a later discussion regarding how they tie in with Mahayana Buddhism. They consist of ‘actual entities,’ ‘prehensions,’ and ‘nexus.’ Within this framework, actual entities are seen as real events that exist in temporal space. It is quoted by Whitehead, “Actual entities – also termed ‘actual occasions’ – are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real.”⁴ These events differ in size and complexity and can range from that of an atom in movement, to a human being. An important distinction to make here is that these actual entities do not take the form of static beings, but rather events or occasions. Such entities are also seen to establish the foundation of being. These actual entities are able to be parsed out and separated into infinitely small pieces, revealing the processes taking place within each of them and how these pieces then come together to form the actual entity in question. The processes are recognized as the prehensions of the actual entity under examination and exist as the totality of relationships that make the entity what it is. Whitehead states that, “each actual entity is divisible in an indefinite number of ways, and each way of division yields its definite quota of prehensions.”⁵ The analysis that takes place when deconstructing an actual entity into the prehensions that make it what it is further reveals the elements of its being. This is where we first gain a glimpse into the interconnected nature of events as proposed by Whitehead. Entities are necessarily composed of the ‘relationalities’ that exist through the ‘prehensions’ that compose them. Whitehead states, “A prehension reproduces in itself the general characteristics of an actual entity: it is referent to an external world, and in this sense will be said to have a

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. Donald W. Sherburne David Ray Griffin (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1978), 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

‘vector character’; it involves emotion and purpose, and valuation, and causation.”⁶ With this quotation we gain insight into another facet of prehensions, namely the connection it establishes between an object and the subject experiencing the object. A conclusion that may be reached from adopting such a perspective regarding prehensions is that any object under examination may not exist independently as an object, but in so far that it is being experienced as a datum through the work of prehensions. The object may not exist independently, and following persists in a state of becoming and interconnection as recognized by the prehensions at play. When multiple actual entities come together to form a more complex being, a ‘nexus’ is formed. Here, a ‘nexus’ is to be considered an intersection among separate actual entities, and whatever binds them together in their totality.⁷ It is further quoted by Whitehead that “there are thus real individual facts of the togetherness of actual entities, which are real, individual, and particular, in the same sense in which actual entities and the prehensions are real, individual, and particular. Any such particular fact of togetherness among actual entities is called a ‘nexus.’”⁸ With this quote Whitehead seeks to establish a similar ontological connection that exists between actual entities and prehensions, within the greater amalgamation of the nexus. He is stating here that there are moments of togetherness to hold under examination, resulting from a sum of the particulars. For the example of the nexus, the particulars would include the sum of the actual entities. Whitehead further goes on to conclude that the ultimate facts of immediate actual experience consist of actual entities, prehensions, and nexus. This is to say that all recognized

⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷ See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. Donald W. Sherburne David Ray Griffin (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1978), 18-31. Chapter Two of *Process and Reality, The Categorical Scheme* (18-31), goes into great detail regarding the notions of Process Metaphysics. Whitehead elaborates a 4th notion, that of the ontological principle which is not approached in this thesis for our purposes.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

forms of being in which we are able to experience may be formulated towards these definitional terms.

To give an example to coherently apply these concepts I will use that of a thunderstorm. A thunderstorm is typically perceived as one event or occasion, the storm itself. However there are multiple layers existing within this storm which may be illuminated when approached through the lens of process metaphysics. For the storm, these layers may include but are not limited to: the movement of cool air, warm air, condensation, and atmospheric tension. All of these aspects converge together to create the thunderstorm. With this example, the thunderstorm as a whole can be identified as a ‘nexus,’ and the factors that establish the nexus are the actual entities. The way these actual entities interact and engage with each other would be recognized as the processes that make the thunderstorm, or borrowing Whitehead’s language, the ‘prehensions.’ These ‘actual entities,’ which can also be understood as occasions, interact for a certain period of time before becoming a part of a new process. This same sort of dissection can be applied to any seemingly simple and isolated entity, as it can be broken down from this perspective to the intricacies and processes that make it what it is. This example of a thunderstorm captures the core understanding found in process philosophy and philosophy of organism; things do not exist independently from one another and that actual entities exist as functional events that are continuously occurring. From this perspective, reality is to be best understood as continuously going on and coming about through the examination of these ‘relational prehensions.’

Another example that will be drawn upon later for further examination would be that of an ecosystem. Considered as a whole, an ecosystem may be seen to represent a complex nexus of being. Ecological systems found within the ecosystem are all connected through water, air, and

soil pathways, constituting the actual entities found within, and the prehensions that bind them in their relationality. In both of the given examples, it can be argued from the Whiteheadian perspective that the recognized prehensions are to be given primary recognition in terms of understanding the entity in question, and furthermore that the language surrounding ‘becoming’ and ‘change’ is emphasized over the existence of static structures. To interweave the examples, a thunderstorm and any given ecosystem in question may also be seen as connected, as thunderstorms have the ability to utterly devastate and simultaneously give life to ecosystems. This would be an example of two separate nexus’ coming together to form a new entity. The example of the ecosystem will be reflected on later in the thesis as it introduces the notion of a complex interplay of processes that all influence each other. One form of interference or negative influence may have the possibility to fully disrupt these processes, much in the similar way a thunderstorm would.

Now having introduced the philosophy of organism, the adoption of a process ontology over substance ontology helps shift the paradigm of language away from materialistic modes of thought (especially in regards to the natural environment), and towards a more holistic and integrated model of being / understanding. Through substance ontology, we may be led to experience objects existing in separate space, however through a shift towards a process lens, a further implication is introduced of an intimate human involvement and togetherness with the surrounding world. I think this is critical in the examination of the environment as it extends beyond being able to track change and relationalities between separate entities, and further emphasizes the direction and the reason of which the change is taking place.

A secondary central theme reoccurring throughout the concepts of process is that of ‘dynamic becoming.’ The term that Whitehead uses to demonstrate this is ‘conrescence,’ which

means growing and weaving together; an organic unification of actual entities to form greater beings. ‘Concrescence’ can be recognized as a declaration of a forward pull towards creativity, suggesting the way of becoming does not adhere to pre-existing structures. In this way, a being that is momentarily created, is not composed of the properties of its previous entities. We are able to gain greater insight into this mode of thought by looking at Whitehead’s ‘perpetual perishing.’ Through this concept, Whitehead explains the emergence of a new being entails loss of the pass. Although such entities may depend on various processes for becoming, once in the process, the new form takes its adapted form through novelty.⁹ This is a coming together of possibilities to form the creation of a new moment which is continuously in a state of happening. Drawing back on the example, the unification of the separate entities of the ecosystem and thunderstorm into the beautiful chaos of a forest storm would stand as an example of such concrescence. Each moment taken into consideration may be seen as drastically different from the previous, although still relying on its dependence from the past events. Whitehead also states in his first category of explanation, “that the world is a process, and that the process is the becoming of actual entities.”¹⁰ In this quote we are able to see how Whitehead believes these entities operated, coming together in a creative process to form for a brief moment, a tangible and identifiable whole, before undergoing an evolution into a new whole based on the prehensions. A point I wish to address here before continuing is that of the seemingly counter intuitive feeling that process metaphysics may bring about. At first pass, it seems improbable that all existing beings are in a state of dynamic change and becoming. This is where scale and

⁹ Ibid., 340.

¹⁰ See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 24. Whitehead denotes section 2 of chapter 2 to laying out the categories of explanation, there are 27 categories in total but here I am referencing the first one.

perception are recognized by Whitehead as key factors that should be taken into consideration to experience this reality of relational change.

The crucial concept being explored here can be demonstrated through the following quote that, “A mountain is a wave given enough time.”¹¹



<Photo taken by Kia Shahideh, October 2020, *White Mountains*, New Hampshire>

I appreciate the example of a mountain as it exudes power, strength, and nothing short of pure awe for individuals who experience them. These attributes may be initially assigned to have a source found within its immovability and resistance to change. However, with a shift in scale, we can appreciate the mountain coming into being over millions of years, and still existing in a fluctuating state. The White Mountains formed from magma intrusions that occurred over the course of 100 million years.¹² I give this as an example not to analyze geology, but rather

¹¹ Peter Sjöstedt-H, "The Philosophy of Organism," *Philosophy Now* 114 (2016).

¹² K. A. Foland and J. C. Allen, "Magma sources for Mesozoic anorogenic granites of the White Mountain magma series, New England, USA," Original Paper, *Contributions to Mineralogy and*

emphasize what Whitehead was approaching towards; humans are in a limited sense perspective. Humans cannot directly experience this rate of change that is happening on a scale of such great magnitude. As is the case with the mountains and other forms of seemingly immovable and unchangeable beings, there is a sheer enormity of time that is required for transformation to occur that exists outside of initial human perception. This is where I believe the true magnificence and beauty of the mountains is derived from; not in its stability but in its fluidity. This same magnitude may be applied in the other end of the spectrum for changes that occur in fractions of a second, eluding our perceptive capabilities. With the above picture, the vibrant foliage rife with colors in the foreground is yet another demonstration of the constant change that is experienced around us, only this time it is change that we are able to tune in to.

In this next section I will detail some aspects which further separates the philosophy of organism from other forms of process thought. One key differentiation would be the important contributions of human sense organs and mental activity for philosophy of organism. Whitehead refers to a completed actual occasion as a ‘superject,’ which is a fully actualized occasion which has passed. According to Whitehead, ‘*superjects*,’ “presuppose a subject which then encounters a datum, and then reacts to the datum. The philosophy of organism presupposes a datum which is met with feelings, and then progressively attains the unity of the subject.”¹³ With the introduction of a subject, whatever process in question does not hold its identity merely as a result of change. Rather, the process or entity becomes an experienced object through the further interaction with a subjective agent. We may recall the relationality and connectedness of prehensions. Here,

Petrology 109, no. 2 (1991), <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00306479>,
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=edssjs&AN=edssjs.94EF1929&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s3916018>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 234.

prehensions can be seen as the conduit relating an experiencing subject to a datum. The given datum may take the form of an actual entity, but it is not able to exist independently as an object. It is stated in *'Mosa-Dharma' and Prehension* by Takeda and Cobb, "insofar as the actual entity as datum can be described without reference to a subject prehending it, that actual entity is only potentially an object. It is actually an object only as prehended in a concreting subject."¹⁴ With this further analysis of the subject-object relationality, the weight given to prehensions as well as an engagement with a subject when it comes to understanding entities in question is emphasized. Returning back to the example of the mountain as an entity, the object of the mountain would remain a potentiality, or a potential object, until it is experienced by another feeling/experiencing subject. This felt experience is what would momentarily transform the actual entity into an experiential object. In this case, without the subject there would be no object and vice versa. I believe this to be a key distinction to be made for philosophy of organism before proceeding. I explore and elaborate upon this concept in the next section, along with some of the similarities shared with Mahayana doctrine.

2. Mahayana Philosophy

Now having laid out some of the core philosophies found in Whitehead's philosophy of organism, I will explore the overlapping fundamentals found within Buddhist Philosophy, specifically Mahayana Buddhism. Within this wide sect of Buddhism, there will be a further emphasis of the Madhyamaka school, or *The Middle Way* school of philosophy that is founded

¹⁴ John B. Cobb Rusei Takeda, Jr., "Mosa-Dharma and Prehension: Nagarjuna and Whitehead Compared," (1974).

on the teachings of Nagarjuna. This section will be drawing from the work of Nagarjuna's, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. This text is considered one of the crucial pillars for Mahayana philosophical and metaphysical understanding which stresses its primary truth, that of 'causality' and 'dependent origination' through the concept of 'emptiness' (Sanskrit; शून्यत *sunyata*, "void").

Before engaging with the work of Nagarjuna specifically, I will depict dynamic *sunyata* through John B. Cobb Jr and Christopher Ives and their work in *The Emptying God*. It is stressed throughout the work of Nagarjuna that all phenomena are empty and lacking any sort of intrinsic self-guided essence. Often times this line of reasoning can be mis-interpreted from a nihilistic perspective that since nothing has intrinsic essence, nothing exists at all. This is not what is meant in the expression of terms such as emptiness or '*sunyata*,' but rather that phenomena or events are empty of any intrinsic essence due to their outward flowing connectivity with occurrences around them. As opposed to seeing it through the lens of lacking essence, it may be seen as a great outward extension. In *The Emptying God*, it is stated, "*sunyata* indicates boundless openness without any particular fixed center."¹⁵ As opposed to a form of negation through lacking essence, this quote reaffirms *sunyata* in a more positive sense of outward expression. Cobb and Ives further posit that the 'truest' form that *sunyata* or emptiness may take is the form of dynamic *sunyata* as opposed to static *sunyata*. They quote, "In the realization of true *sunyata*, form is ceaselessly emptied, turning into formless emptiness, and formless emptiness is ceaselessly emptied and forever freely taking form."¹⁶ With this shift towards a dynamic state of emptiness, the entity in question exists in a constant state of oscillation between

¹⁵ *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. Christopher Ives John B Cob (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

that of losing its form through full outward relationality, and then regaining it due to the emptying nature of such relations. An example to demonstrate this constant motion of formlessness to form and vice versa could be represented through a mug on a desk. The mug, through *sunyata*, loses its form through its full outward relationality. It no longer holds individual essence as it is entirely constituted of these outwards connections. These could include but are not limited to the contents found within, the desk in which it rests on, and the subject experiencing the mug. The mug, through the process of dynamic *sunyata*, then regains its form due to the process of emptying such relationships. Upon seeing the outward connectivity of the relationships themselves, we are left with the form of the mug. This would be continued as a re-occurring process. The introduction of dynamism through the concept of *sunyata* provides us with a definition more aligned with process perspectives, and will be further utilized in the comparative dialogue with Whitehead.

From the Mahayana framework and perspective, the connections that are established through *sunyata* are what fundamentally define a being. Since these connections are applied externally, and following that a thing is entirely constituted from these connections, it does not exist in it of itself, but as a conditional factor of all other things around it. An example to demonstrate this point could be a leaf blowing in the wind. Examining the leaf in it of itself removed from its conditional environment furthermore removes the leaves primary essence. A more proper and contextualized understanding may be brought upon by examining the leaf and the surrounding conditions. The leaf would not be able to exist without the soil that grew the tree, the sun that gives life to the tree, and the branch that that extends outwards to hold it. A blowing leaf is also further dependent on the wind. From the standpoint of emptiness, these factors constitute the leaf as opposed to the leaf existing in an independent fashion. In the same

way in Whitehead's philosophy of organism, actual entities are primarily recognized for the prehensions, or relational aspects which make them what they are. This is where the convergence begins to take place and a constructive metaphysical framework begins to temporarily take form; both schools of thought place a heavy emphasis on the connective nature of reality. This is the concept of emptiness and dependent origination and can be seen through the following stanza found in *The Middle Way*:

Whatever comes into being dependent on another
 Is not identical to that thing.
 Nor is it different from it.
 Therefore it is neither nonexistent in time nor permanent.¹⁷

The first line of the above stanza depicts the concept of 'emptiness' and 'dependent origination' as things do not exist in it of themselves, but rather as stated; whatever comes into being is dependent on another. This ties directly to the philosophy of organism as there is a keen emphasis on the dependence of being, or relationships between entities to gain a further solidified understanding of that entity and how it operates within the universe. Whitehead also notes that prehensions are "concrete facts of relatedness", recognizing them as the connecting processes that bind together actual entities.¹⁸ In the same way, an entity from that standpoint of Nagarjuna is best understood through its relations, as those are the relations that make the entity what it is. It is also stated by Nagarjuna, "if there is essence, the whole world will be unarising, unceasing, and static. The entire phenomenal world would be immutable."¹⁹ With this statement

¹⁷ Nagarjuna Mulamadhyamakakarika, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 49.

¹⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.

¹⁹ Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, 72.

he is making the point that if entities were to suppose their own separate essence, then it is entirely separate without dependence upon anything else for its existence. As a result it cannot be changed. Following, if all things had essence, the world would be unchanging as quoted above. The dynamic state of existence and change may be seen as another recognition of the operation of *sunyata*. Similarly, Whitehead makes the point that, “it is fundamental to the metaphysical doctrine of the philosophy of organism, that the notion of an actual entity as the unchanging subject of change is completely abandoned.”²⁰ Philosophy of organism does similarly in denying isolated, individual essence to things. A further point to be made here is the distinction of retaining diversity in being while reflecting the same universal becoming. Nagarjuna quotes that whatever comes into being is not identical or different from the thing it is dependent on. These two lines from the stanza will be revisited in a discussion in Chapter 3 regarding distinctions made between the ‘phenomena’ and ‘noumena’ found in Hua-yen Buddhism.

A second primary emphasis that can be extracted from Nagarjuna’s work is that of ‘dynamic birth’ and ‘becoming’ as demonstrated in the following stanza. In Chapter XXI, “Examination of Becoming and Destruction”, Nagarjuna makes the imperative bond between the existence of entities and the process of becoming and destruction. Here it is stated:

When no entities exist,
There is no becoming or destruction.
Without becoming and destruction,
There are no existent entities.²¹

²⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 29.

²¹ Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, 57.

The above stanza demonstrates that existence and becoming are inseparably connected with one another as one is unable to be or exist without the other. This becoming also compliments Whitehead's first category of explanation: "that the world is a process, and that the process is the becoming of actual entities"²² as stated prior. The above stanza portrays that existent entities have it within their nature to be in a state of destruction and becoming, as is also emphasized within the philosophy of organism through the creative advance into the future as previously discussed through the term concrescence. As mentioned in the first section, Whitehead does not see actual entities as simply processes of becoming. They also have an 'objectively immortal' aspect which is demonstrated through their potential of being prehended by other actual entities. In this discussion of permanence and change, it is quote by Thomas McFarlane, "these two irreducible aspects of the actual entity relate to the philosophical problem of acknowledging both permanence and change in reality."²³ He quotes Whitehead, "there is not the mere problem of fluence and permanence. There is the double problem actuality with permanence, requiring fluency as its completion, and actuality with fluency, requiring permanent as its completion."²⁴ This quote is in reference to the necessary qualities of change for metaphysics, while simultaneously recognizing the superject as brining about permanence through experiencing an entity. McFarlane goes on to postulate that a Buddhist correlate to the notion of a superject would suggest "that every impermanent phenomenon, every fleeting drop of experience, does not simply disappear without any trace, but always leaves behind consequences that enter into other moments of experience."²⁵ McFarlane explains that this could mean the karmic consequences of

²² Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.

²³ Thomas J. McFarlane, "Process and Emptiness: A Comparison of Whitehead's Process Philosophy and Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy," *Integral Science*, 2000.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

each phenomenon create its 'objective immortality.' Another way of phrasing this would be that an entities relatedness to other entities is its permanent aspect.

After examining Whitehead's philosophy of organism as well as some core understandings from Mahayana Buddhism, the frame of focus as to what is worth developing in a metaphysical sense becomes increasingly apparent. The primary argument developed by both of these schools is that each event comes into being due to its relation to every other event; it appreciates them all as necessary to its own being, and from this develops a deep sense of connection and ontological togetherness. In conjunction with the cosmic connection being established between all beings, there is the constant state of change or becoming that can also be found echoing through both these philosophies. It follows that Nagarjuna and Whitehead agree extensively in their advocacy for being as becoming or process. *In Mosa-Dharma and Prehension*, Takeda and Cobb Jr. explore some of the varying applications of such views from both the perspective of Whitehead and Nagarjuna. In this article it is explained that Whitehead seeks to pave the way for "widening horizons of concern," while such realizations for Nagarjuna leads to the compassion possessed by the Bodhisattva through such deep and intimate interconnectedness²⁶. Although the underlying philosophies were taken in different directions, I believe the conclusions reached from both will be useful in a further engagement with this research. In the last chapter I will seek to do both of the stated goals, broaden a horizon of ethical concern to contain the natural world, while simultaneously drawing on compassion from such interconnectedness.

²⁶ Rusei Takeda, "Mosa-Dharma and Prehension: Nagarjuna and Whitehead Compared."

3. Core Differences: Interpenetration vs Cumulative Penetration

In establishing a constructive dialogue between the philosophy of organism and Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy, I wish to flesh out some of the primary differences that exist for two reasons. I recognize that this project has certain limitations and wish to acknowledge them before continuing. I also seek to distinguish between these two philosophies which are being brought together in a constructive dialogue to honor and appreciate them both. For this following conversation I will be drawing on *Process Metaphysics and Hua-yen Buddhism* from Steve Odin.

Steve Odin primarily focuses on a Hua-yen analysis which exists as a sub-school of the Mahayana branch, and for the purposes of this discussion reflects a great deal of similarity in their metaphysical speculations.

One of the fundamental differences attributed here is how becoming comes to be, and the temporal nature of events. Hua-yen's position is that the efficient causes of events flow from the past, present, and future with equivalent force, establishing a simultaneous and fully rounded temporality. This is defined as '*interpenetration*,' and through this lens, there is a removal of any form of linear progression. In this sense, the temporal scale is shifted as future events are seen to have influence on the present entity in question with the same magnitude and force of past and present events. This is an important distinction as it presents a more circular depiction of time as opposed to the Whiteheadian perspective. A secondary defining point of the Hua-yen analysis of temporal reality rests with the universality of all things. This is to say that to a certain extent the Hua-yen vision implicates that every event is present in all events such that each one contains and expresses the entirety of the universe. The notion of all within one and one within all will be fleshed out in greater detail in the Hua-yen analysis found in Chapter 3. Whitehead necessarily

relies on time to demonstrate the ontological becoming that is pervasive throughout the process notion of existence, however Hua-yen Buddhism requires no such distinction. Whitehead's position involves "cumulative penetration" which presents a direct theory of "causal transmission."²⁷ It is quoted by Whitehead, "The world is thus faced by the paradox that, at least in its higher actualities, it craves for novelty and yet is haunted by terror at the loss of the past, with its familiarities and its loved ones."²⁸ With this quote he is further referencing to the 'emergent synthesis' of events into the present. Whitehead holds that whatever occasion arises into momentary existence, that such occasion is conceivable in it of itself without further reference to its past causations. Here we see the tension referred to within the quote, the simultaneous desire for emergent novelty, while experiencing trepidation at the fact that the previous occasions will be lost in the process of creation. This is to say that the creative advance into the future takes the form of a synthesis in which past events lose their form and function to produce the entity in question. Odin further states that, "although in the temporal sense there is only asymmetrical relatedness or what has been termed in this study a doctrine of 'cumulative penetration,' there can still be symmetrical relatedness of interpenetration between events in the spatial sense."²⁹ Odin here makes another important distinction from the standpoint of Whitehead where he recognizes the differences they each reflect in their temporal forms, but ties them back together through their expansive interrelatedness. I believe this distinction to be a reflection of the Buddhist emphasis on the present moment of experience, as a single thought instant holds within it the entirety of existence: past, present, and future. Tuning into this sort of

²⁷ Steve Odin, *Process Metaphysics and Hua-Yen Buddhism: A Critical Study of Cumulative Penetration vs. Interpenetration* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1982), 5.

²⁸ Whitehead *Process and Reality*, 340.

²⁹ Steve Odin, *Process Metaphysics and Hua-Yen Buddhism: A Critical Study of Cumulative Penetration vs. Interpenetration* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1982).

moment will be drawn upon later in the chapter 4 discussion with Thich Nhat Hanh to discuss how individuals are able to successfully digest these new metaphysical perspectives, and what some of the necessary consequences of doing so are. Even though this minor distinction exists between these differing philosophies, I believe we are still able to productively draw from the depths of the similarities shared to continue the conversation and provide further claims in support of both Mahayana and Process thought.

In this chapter I have presented a constructive metaphysical analysis that ties together the work of Alfred North Whitehead as well as Nagarjuna that emphasizes a reality of ontological togetherness as well as dynamic becoming. Using *Process and Reality*, as well as *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, their core philosophies were presented to have an immense overlap, including the fleeting nature of reality through that of concrescence and becoming as well as the universal connectivity of entities as posited by both schools. This connectivity was demonstrated through the concepts of emptiness, as well as the relational prominence of prehensions from Whitehead. After the bridge had been established, Steve Odin was utilized to bring a critical lens to the analysis taking place, in both appreciation and recognition of some of the differences that exist between process philosophy and Buddhism. Here the conclusions reached include that of total interpenetration from that standpoint of Buddhism, as well as a 'creative advance from destruction' conception of time from Whitehead. The energetic and creative sense of becoming in tandem with the ontology of interconnectivity that is demonstrated in the proposed constructive view establishes a bedrock to further build a more holistic conception of the natural world which will be explored in the next chapter with further references to Hua-yen Buddhism.

III. Chapter 3: Flowery Splendor (Hua-yen) Buddhism and Humans in the Realm of Eco-Process

Existence is my existence, the existences of the Buddhas, and the existences of all sentient beings... The Existence of the Buddha is the existences of the sentient beings and vice versa. They are not identical but are nevertheless identical; they are not different but are nevertheless different. -Kukai³⁰

With the previously presented vision of reality, a comparative metaphysics suggests a new language and perspective with a further emphasis on becoming. The next step within the process of formulating this thesis is applying the metaphysical claims of interconnectivity towards our own existence as humans, and our orientation towards the rest of reality. Where do we find ourselves in this ephemeral, deeply interconnected experience in relationship to the natural environment? This chapter will be dedicated to presenting a possible response to the previous question of human orientation towards nature, drawing on the wisdom and insight of Hua-yen (flowery splendor) Buddhist cosmology. The metaphorical representation of ‘Indra’s web’ will be used as a focusing apparatus to further highlight the relationality that links humans with the natural world. After I present and detail Indra’s net, I will explore cultural comparisons with Western metaphysics to further emphasize and contrast the ideas being represented. Finally I will

³⁰ Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams eds., *Buddhism and Ecology: The interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 79.

end this chapter with a discussion regarding the distinctions between the universal and particular, and where diversity may find its place within these given frameworks.

4. Hua-yen Buddhist Ontology

Hua-yen Buddhism is a distinctly Chinese form of Buddhism that underwent an evolution from its Indian Mahayana parent school. During the turn of the 7th century, the emperor of China resisted Buddhism and caused disruption towards Buddhist practices. This forced many monks to continue their practice in rural areas, where a lack of strict scriptures to follow and freedom to explore various forms of thought brought on new traditions. Hua-yen was one of the resulting schools, primarily focusing on its metaphysical image of interpenetration. The development from earlier forms of Indian Buddhism to the Chinese variations of Hua-yen can also be recognized as encompassing a shift towards a more positive view of emptiness. It is stated by Robert Gimello, a renowned Buddhist scholar, in reference to Hua-yen and Mahayana, “whereas it is typical of earlier Buddhism to employ negative, ‘neither/nor’ phrasing to express this teaching [of emptiness and dependent origination] and its corollaries, Hua-yen favored more affirmative locutions, even if they required figurative rather than literal language.”³¹ This positive language can be recognized to take the form of a great opening, and flowing outward of relationalities as opposed to a mere lacking of self-intrinsic essence. This shift can be seen as representing a

³¹ Robert M. Gimello, "Huayan," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005). 4147.

synthesis of Chinese and Indian thought and will be the primary focus for the rest of the analysis found within this chapter.

Hua-yen Buddhist thought presents a similarly unified reality with the implication of the mutual interdependence of all phenomena, drawing on the concept of emptiness found in Mahayana. This vision is demonstrated through the metaphorical representation of Indra's web. For the presented representation, a net is cast out infinitely in all directions. Within each eye of this net is nestled a brilliant, shining jewel. Since the net is infinite in its reach and orientation, so too are the jewels infinite in their number. Upon closer examination of one these jewels, we are able to see the reflection of all other jewels within the one. As we investigate the reflections, we are able to see that the reflections also have the reflections of all the other jewels. This reflection of all within the one, and one within the all is present regardless of which perspective is taken or which level of net is being examined. This infinite reflecting process occurs in all directions and all orientations. As stated by Francis Cook, "it [indra's web] symbolizes a cosmos in which there is infinitely repeated interrelationship among all members of the cosmos."³²

A typical representation of this metaphor can be seen through that of a spider web with droplets gently hinged upon each node. With a keen eye, one may be able to see the reflection of the other water droplets within one. Each droplet is interconnected through the spider web, and following, each is necessary to the picture as a whole. I was fortunate enough to capture a visual representation of the Indra's web on a fleeting fall morning while walking to West Chester's campus.

³² Francis Cook, "Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy," (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 214.



<Photo taken by Kia Shahideh- October 21, 2020, West Chester PA>

With the metaphor of Indra's web in place, it allows for a further examination of certain implications regarding human existence. With Indra's web operating as a further metaphysical representation of reality, it necessarily follows that within the scope of the web, there exists no such thing as a metaphysically independent being since all jewels are seen reflecting all others. A metaphysically independent being here would be a being or event of which there is no outside influence or connection. This would be a being that would be fully and completely its intrinsic self, rejecting all forms of influence. A metaphysically dependent being on the other hand, would

be one with its strands of existence deeply intertwined in the mesh of life. With Indra's web, all beings are found to be intertwined; changing the orientation and shape of one jewel would necessarily change all other jewels and would affect the whole. A brief distinction between emptiness or *sunyata* and Indra's web is necessary before proceeding. Emptiness recognizes the outward relationality of whatever entity in a certain sphere of consideration. Indra's web on the other hand, extends this same relationality to all entities in existence. 'Emptiness' is useful for consideration of how individual entities are oriented, while Indra's web provides a larger structure of reality that pervades all entities. With this structure we are able to see that a consequence of this ontology of interconnectedness is the consequence of connection. Incorporating the previous concept of dynamic *sunyata*, it further reveals how the entities or jewels found within this web engage with change. The form of one jewel is dependent on the rest of the web and becomes formless, while also emptying those connections and regaining form. This is to say that a change in one person's existence, or utilizing the metaphor, in one jewel, would necessarily imply a change to the whole unity of being. A change in one jewel would be seeing reflecting infinitely throughout.

In this next section I will draw on Nagarjuna's 'Doctrine of Two Truths' to further clarify the roles of relative reality and the above depicted 'ultimate reality' of Indra's web. Nagarjuna writes,

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharama
 Is based on two truths:
 A truth of worldly convention
 And an ultimate truth.
 Those who do not understand
 The distinction drawn between these two truths

Do not understand
The buddhas profound truth.³³

This quote reflects the goal of Madhyamika philosophy which is liberation through suffering by gaining insight into the ultimate reality of things. The quote suggests that the starting point for such an experience is the conventional, everyday experience. The term translated ‘truth of worldly convention’ (Skt: *samvrti-satya*) is a truth regarding how things appear to our ordinary senses. Such an experience must be seen through the lens of emptiness, and once that takes place, an individual may experience the ultimate truth. The term ‘ultimate truth’ (Skt: *paramartha-stya*) shows the way things are once we investigate them to discover their nature. In this way you cannot have the conventional without the ultimate, or the ultimate without the conventional as they correspond directly with each other. It is quoted by Jay L Garfield in this commentary on the middle way, “but this insight [ultimate truth] can only be gained through reasoning and hence through language and thought. And the truth that is to be grasped can only be indicated through language and thought, which are thoroughly conventional and which can only be interpreted literally at the conventional level.”³⁴ Garfield makes this point to indicate that Nagarjuna is not prioritizing the ultimate over the conventional, but rather stating that the ultimate nature of things is completely dependent upon understanding conventional truth. An example of this that he gives is that in order to explain the concept of emptiness, one must necessarily use words and concepts in the explanation which both take root in the conventional. With this clarification, it becomes clearer the role and relationality that

³³ Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, 68.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 298.

exists between such grandiose concepts such as emptiness and Indra's web and that of everyday existence.

To give a concrete example of the concepts of deep and intimate interconnection beyond the metaphorical and abstract representations, we can turn our attention towards modern ecology. In the study of this science, it is becoming increasingly apparent that an organism cannot be fully examined and understood once it is removed from its environment. This is a result of the organism losing its niche function within the environment; without the surrounding environment it ceases to hold its being. Another point to note here is that once the organism is removed from the environment, the necessary conditions that make the environment also change. Within this microcosm of Indra's web, we are able to recognize that the environment surrounding the organism is as much a part of it as the organism is of the environment; the two mutually depend on each other for existence. A simple example of this could be a honeybee and an apple tree. The honeybee needs and depends on the apple tree to produce its food, and in return the apple tree needs the honeybee to spread its pollen. If one were to be removed from this symbiotic equation, both would collapse. If a bee were to be removed from this analysis and examined separately, it would lose the functionality that makes it a unique being, namely seeking the cooperative relationship with the apple tree. This conception of all mutually dependent phenomena in the natural world highlights the sensitivity of the ecosystems on our planet, as potentially changing one small aspect may propagate to a major environmental change within the area. These changes could be produced internally within the environment, but increasingly so, and as will be suggested in the final chapter, are seen to be coming from outside human influence with usually harmful consequences.

Now with the metaphor of Indra's web in place, some of the implications regarding human perception and experience of reality will be presented. The first one here would be the way in which people typically experience their relationships to the external world. Habitually, in the individualistic understanding of self, the given attitude towards relationships is that there exists a strict set and limited number with specific entities or individuals. These relationships may include, marital relations, friendships, as well as the interactions with whatever set of amounts of species are used for consumption purposes. This is typically where the list of relations would come to an end, as there would be no seemingly direct influence on individuals or things outside of this initial sphere of relations. Hua-yen through Indra's web, suggests that isolated being do not exist in this form, but rather one being exemplified through the unity of existence. This unity proposes that an individual does have relations with all beings. The individual and whatever other entity in question are related in that they both satisfy the condition of which they are connected to the cosmos. They are connected to the extent that they are both incorporated into the unified realm of being and meet the conditional requirement required for existence. The Hua-yen universe is also one of total intercausality, that is to say what affects one being in the cosmos necessarily affects every other being within.

Another reason for seemingly separate entities to have relation can once again be seen through the lens of interconnection as demonstrated through Indra's web. One node of activity or phenomena has an influence and impact on all other nodes. This point is captured beautifully by a Vietnamese Thiền Buddhist monk and a peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh in his presentation of a sheet of paper:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow: and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So, we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are.³⁵

For Hanh, the relationality between entities which may initially seem separate, make themselves known through further examination. These relationships may exist in a way that is subtle and not fully apparent, however are both present and necessary for the existence of a piece of paper. This draws on the counter intuitive recognition that a piece of paper and a cloud are deeply interrelated, positing the possibility of relationalities existing outside the realm of human intuitive understanding.

5. Cultural Comparisons

To further help illuminate this view, I will contrast it with the traditional Western philosophical concepts found projected through Judeo-Christian, as well as the Greek traditions of thought regarding metaphysical assumptions and human experience. Through both of these schools of thought, humans are typically placed at the apex regarding any form of conceptualization. In this section, this typically anthropocentric model will be juxtaposed with Hua-yen Buddhism. The first primary difference between these schools is that Hua-yen does not deal in the realm of the teleological. This is to say that it does not answer the question of a specific design or purpose regarding the material world. It also makes no claims regarding the beginning or end of the

³⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, "Clouds in Each Paper," *Clouds In Each Paper* (awakin.org).

universe. Through Hua-yen, the universe is taken as a fact, which can only be explained by the inner dynamics at play within. For this section I will draw on the work of Masao Abe, as well as Catherine Keller to engage with specific criticism of western metaphysics.

The traditional Judeo-Christian Western thought, as well as metaphysical contemplation through the lens of philosophy dating back to the Greeks, places humans at the frontal nexus of existence and experience, separate from the surrounding world. Hua-yen makes no such distinctions and places all experience upon the same plane. This leads to the traditional religious Western view that often contains a hierarchy with God sitting at the top, humans in middle, and nature on the bottom. Although there exist subtle nuances to Christian interpretations towards nature, the most commonly understood and applied narrative is that God transcends nature, nature is a creation from the creator, and human beings are exclusively created in God's image and are segregated from nature. This has allowed humans the autonomy over the natural world as it is often seen as a commodity to be utilized or exploited. One such nuanced interpretation may be seen through the work of Masao Abe, a Japanese Buddhist philosopher and religious studies scholar in his academic inquiry in conjoining Christ and emptiness. Abe suggests in his work *The Emptying God*, a self-emptying entity in which God becomes Christ through the process of fully emptying herself. This is to say that she forgoes her divine omnipotence to become human, and in doing so, becomes an interconnected part of the reality of all humans. She has emptied herself through that of *sunyata* to become a human. This move is done in order to establish an inter-religious dialogue that seeks common ground between eastern and western religions rooted in their metaphysical assertions. However, even with the presented similarities, the differences still make themselves known. Abe further goes on to quote in a dialogue regarding human reason in respect to Buddhism and Christianity, "In Christianity, which is based on God's revelation, the

conflict between divine revelation and human reason has been a persistent problem. In Buddhism, which is based on the realization of *Sunyata*, there is no issue equivalent to that conflict. But to properly embrace reason in its pure and transcendental or dialectical form, and to make it alive and useful, *Sunyata* must be grasped most dynamically through the clear realization of self-emptying.³⁶ From the perspective of Buddhism, there is an endeavor to seek to overcome a conceptual, dualistic approach to understanding reality, and sees rational thinking as a potential hindrance for awakening. Abe also makes the point that rationality in this sense has been a point of tension within Christianity as well. However the conclusion reached here places human thought and reason yet again on a higher tier on a hierarchy of values. As John Cobb points out in Abe's engagement with the self-emptying God, even in attempts to comparative engage in dialogue with differing schools of religion, hints of anthropocentrism seem to creep in. In his work, Abe applies such values as human reason only to the human dimension, placing nature in a realm of valuelessness.³⁷ Abe maintains a strong account for reason and German Idealism, which in this context, supposes that only the human point of view introduces values. Reflecting back once again in comparison with Eastern thought, in Hua-yen there is no center, or from an examination of any jewel found within Indra's net, there is a center, but it is everywhere. Values are not specifically reserved for one specific form of being, but rather apply outwardly to all.

In regards to certain teleological differences between Eastern and Western perspectives, I turn to Catherine Keller and her work in the *Theology of Becoming*. Here Keller states, "Christianity established as unquestionable truth that everything is created not from some formless and bottomless something but from nothing: an omnipotent God could have created the

³⁶ John B. Cobb Jr. and Christopher Ives eds., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 36.

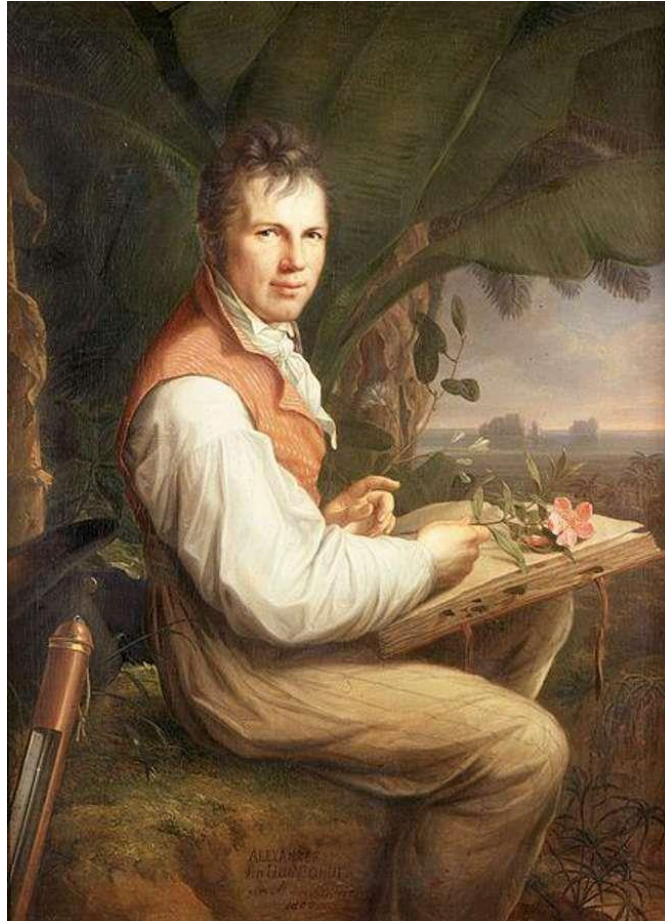
³⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

world only *ex nihilo*.”³⁸ In her work Keller seeks to overcome this dogma and pushes to introduce the possibility of creation coming out of something as opposed to nothing. She states that the author of Genesis, as well as the majority of the ancient world, believed the universe was created from a primal chaos. However the push back to adopting such a view as God now had to contend with some other ‘something’ outside of herself before creation was noticeably intense. Keller instead proposes adopting a point of consideration known as ‘*Creatio ex Profundis*,’ or creation out of the watery depths. In her work, Keller engages with biblical interpretation that lay outside the scope of this project but should be explored for those individuals interested. Here we are able to see again in large part the teleological underpinnings of largely agreed upon forms of Western metaphysical thought, specifically that there is a definite beginning, and that something can come from nothing. To draw back in the comparison, Hua-yen and Buddhism more generally would be more in lined with Keller in their conception of infinite time, and more generally the lack of importance in engaging with such teleological speculations.

To further emphasize the dichotomy that exists between the Western tradition in metaphysics and Asian non-dualistic cosmology of nature, I will turn to cultural expressions of these ideologies. Art can be seen as an insight and window into cultural perspectives which we are able to peel through to gain greater understanding of how certain philosophies operate. It is seen in Western art over the past hundreds of years a trend that heavily focuses on individual human faces and portraits. Francis Cook quotes in his comparison of Hua-yen thought to the western world, “In European art, at least up to the advent of the Romantic movement, a representative, and perhaps dominant, genre has been the portrait. To walk through the rooms of a large art museum is to receive an eloquent testimonial concerning the preoccupation of

³⁸ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003),4.

Western man for the last several hundred years.”³⁹ I will now provide two examples of art that portray this sentiment and display the representational differences.



Alexander Von Humboldt (1806), Friedrich Georg Weitsch

<https://www.ranker.com/list/famous-portrait-works-from-the-romanticism-period-and-movement/reference>

With the above depiction, we are able to see the immense amount of detail provided for the facial expressions, clothing worn, and emotions shown for the given man. Often there is a tiny window or small glimpse into the outside world, which is used as a reference point so the

³⁹ Cook, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, 217.

viewer knows where the painting oriented. The natural world becomes the backdrop for human drama, and the humans take center stage. Cook argues that this is primarily an anthropocentric model of interpreting reality, where humans are placed at the forefront.

Taking in direct comparison, in Eastern art the landscape and nature become the pronounced primary feature. Humans have their rightful place, but it is of one with the whole, and often times can be easily over-looked as they are portrayed as tiny huts or small dots in a grand forest or mountain range. In the Asian wing of the museum, few faces are show cased, instead opting towards a wide array of landscapes. Nature is no longer the backdrop, but rather becomes harmoniously blended with humans and human features being depicted within the art.



Xia and Xiang Rivers, Dong Yuan

<https://en/dpm.org.cn/collections/collections/2014-09-05/96.html>

Here in this magnificent depiction of ‘Xiao and Xiang Rivers,’ we are able to see the concepts of interconnectivity and *sunyata*. There is no direct center to be found within this picture, and all of

its contents are blended together harmoniously. It is important to note that humans are also to be found here as they have their place, but no longer are they the center of the artwork. They exist as a natural and continuous extension of the rest of the environment in which they inhabit. Cook states in reference to Eastern Asian art, “The viewer is struck by a sense of continuity among the various elements of the scene in which all are united in an organic whole.”⁴⁰ The opposing representations of art reveal not only how one interprets human orientation towards nature, but more broadly the basic structure of existence in which strict hierarchies are in place. Now we are able to approach the crux of this chapter. Humans and nature are no longer interpreted to be seen as existing on separate planes of hierarchal existence. Through the egalitarian force of Indra’s web and Hua-yen ontology, human beings and nature are to be understood as both incorporating intrinsic value as existing members in the jewel net of Indra. Furthermore, one set of actions or intentions negatively received by one, necessarily reflects the same change within the other. This sets the groundwork for the last chapter as the environmental applications and a potential new language in the form of a nature ethic is proposed.

6. Phenomenal vs Noumenal

Now I will present and respond to a common objection that may arise when discussing this perspective before proceeding. In this section I will be drawing on Jin Y. Park and her work with Buddhism and postmodernity to clear charges of a totality of sameness found in Hua-yen. This will be done in order to make further room to engage with Hua-yen in an ethical discussion

⁴⁰ Ibid., 218.

which necessarily requires a recognition of differences and forms among beings. Indra's net can be seen to sometimes represent an absolute egalitarian vision of a Buddhist cosmos. The objection is that if everything truly is one with the eternal cosmos, then everything is fundamentally the same. Another way to phrase this; where does this depiction of a unified intercausal reality take into consideration individual differences? From the standpoint of this objection, independent beings no longer exist, and everything lacks the qualities that makes individuals and organisms unique. This objection has its merit and needs to be cleared to further establish the diversity of entities within the framework of Hua-yen. For clarification on this topic, we can turn our attention to the fourfold view as discussed by Hua-yen Buddhists. This view is a four layered hermeneutical tool introduced by Park to explain the nature of existence by emphasizing the relationship between the noumenal (Chinese: 理 *Li*) and the phenomenal (Chinese: 事 *Shih*).⁴¹ Here the noumenal designates the overarching principles that ties reality together. This can be recognized as the interconnected nature of reality as demonstrated by Indra's web and can be further understood as the structure of existence. The phenomenal is taken to be the actual reality experienced and expresses the diversity of form and function of entities. Among Hua-yen Buddhist scholars an extensive conversation exists regarding which of these realms is to be given due importance, but for the scope of this examination, we will instead examine how it is believed they interact with one another, and furthermore how space is made for phenomena within this worldview.

⁴¹ Jin Y. Park's *Buddhism and Postmodernity* (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2008).

It is stated by a postmodern Buddhist scholar and a predominant Asian and comparative philosopher, Jin. Y Park in *Buddhism and Postmodernity : Zen, Huayan, and the Possibility of Buddhist Postmodern Ethics* (2008):

Each and every phenomenon is to be understood as the unfolding of the underlying noumenon of the phenomenon. However, the ultimate confirmation of noumenon becomes possible only through the actual happening of each phenomenon. In this sense, Huayan Buddhism emphasizes that the Buddhist noumenon of interdependence is not a separate entity or an abstract concept that can exist beyond reality, but that which is taking place each and every moment in this world, here and now.⁴²

Park here introduces the deeply connected and dependent nature of both the phenomenal and noumenal realms. The phenomenal is the present and necessary expression of the noumenal, and the noumenal would not be able to articulate itself or make itself known without the phenomenal. It can further be recognized from this quote that such abstractions that are emphasized in Huayan Buddhism are not isolated in the realm of the theoretical, but rather they make themselves known and present in the reality experienced. As stated by Park, the way these metaphysical philosophies are demonstrated is through the phenomenal. I will also refer back here to the doctrine of two truths as presented by Nagarjuna. The conventional truth and the absolute truth were also seen as two sides of the same coin which fundamentally depended on each other for their being.

On first pass, the phenomenal world may be seen as consisting of diverse entities. This is where Hua-yen takes the seemingly fragmented existence of each of these phenomena and illuminates them on the level of the noumenal. The noumenal here suggests that the basic structure of existence is identical. As we are able to begin to see, having this identical sub

⁴² Ibid., 176.

structure for existence does not rid of the diverse form of actual entities, but as stated prior is the necessary expression of the structure itself.

The importance and relevance of the phenomenal within the realm of Hua-yen can be further suggested by looking into a chapter of the *Huayan Jing* (華嚴經), or otherwise known as the flower garland scripture. In the chapter, *Rufai Pin*, or “Entering the Realm of Reality,” a truth-seeker, Sudhana asks how to properly practice the path of the bodhisattva. He was sent on a pilgrimage, and what distinguishes his journey is the diversity of characters he encountered who reflect themselves as dharma teachers. Included within the scope of the diversity of teachers he came across, he found: sages, kings, heretics, as well as incense sellers. Each of these dharma teachers had mastered a certain type of Buddhist teaching, and were able to do so by perfecting their own occupation.⁴³ Even so, all of these individuals denied having attained any form of perfection along the path towards enlightenment. With this text presenting the variety of the dharma teachers in their many forms, and furthermore that all these teachers unknowingly held an aspect of ‘truth’ regarding bodhisattva path, it can be concluded that there is a heavy suggestion being made towards the importance of the world of function and diversity.

Park also makes states that that to understand the noumenal one requires wisdom, but to understand the phenomenal, one requires compassion. Park quotes with respect to compassion in Hua-yen, “The Huayan (Hua-yen) vision of compassion is completely anchored in the understanding of the noumenon, which is defined as the emptiness of an entity. Compassion, understood in this manner, cannot be a simple empathy for other beings in a predicament. Instead, compassion becomes possible when one becomes aware of the absolute dependent co-

⁴³ Ibid., 178.

arising of reality.”⁴⁴ With this lens towards compassion, individual entities engaged in separate ethical dilemmas are no longer recognized, rather compassion stems from a recognition of the deeply interconnected nature of reality. This is precisely the ‘compassion,’ the resonating recognition of the noumenal in the other, that will be further drawn upon to establish a moral ontology which places humans in a web of relationality.

Within the scope of this chapter we utilized the ontology of Hua-yen Buddhist thought and doctrine to further expand the comparative metaphysics established in chapter 2 to human orientation regarding the natural world. The all expansive metaphor of Indra’s net was brought into dialogue to further engage all entities and being within a mesh of ontological connection. Necessary implications of such a view were explored such as metaphysically independent/dependent beings and plural relationality. Comparisons were made to certain Western metaphysical notions to further emphasize the Eastern mode of thought through the lens of art. Finally, there was an examination of how the particular and the universal interact with each other and make further space for engaging in an ethical discussion. The last chapter will expand upon the notion of compassion to establish a moral ontological framework where the individual is no longer seem as a separate entity, but as one with the whole. From this connection, the moral responsibilities will be explored towards an environmental ethic.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 184.

IV. Chapter 4 : Nature and Human as One, a Potential Source of Ethics of Nature

If you yourself, who are the valley streams and mountains, cannot develop the power which illuminates the true reality of the mountains and valley streams, who else is going to be able to convince you that you and the streams and mountains are one and the same? -Dogen⁴⁵

In this poem, a Japanese Buddhist poet and philosopher, Dogen Kigen 道元希玄 (1200-1253) echoes Buddhist interconnectivity and interpenetration; we are the mountains, and we are the streams. We hear the suggestion that it becomes our responsibility not only to come to this wondrous realization, but also guide others to it for the sake and safety of the earth we inhabit. This is the crucial change in consciousness that is both required and necessary for any form of ecological harmony to take form. The final chapter of this thesis will be further resonating the sentiment found expressed above, specifically the realization of a symbiotic state of being where humans are not only connected with nature, but are one with it. With this approach towards the natural world, a deep well of compassion will be drawn upon through the realization of the other to respond to the ecological crisis facing us. Continuing through the lens of Hua-yen Buddhist

⁴⁵ *Zen Master Dogen*, Keisei Sanshoku, trans. Francis Cook (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1978), 114. Eihei Dogen (Dogen Kigen) is the founder of the Soto Zen sect of Buddhism which placed a heavy emphasis on sitting meditation, Zazen. His famous works include that of the 95 essays called *Shōbōgenzō*.

cosmology and Process thought, this chapter will build upon the previous sections to formulate towards a holistic environmental ethic of interdependence.

The current trend towards environmental problems is gaining traction as their validity and urgency are being brought to the forefront of human recognition. However the potential solutions being proposed to tackle these problems undergo the same error that brought these problems into existence, namely the notion of human superiority over the natural world. Stemming from this metaphysical starting point is the idea that humans have the ability to control and manipulate the environment. Present solutions being prescribed would include a doubling-down on human ingenuity to produce more advanced technology that are able to reflect sun rays, suck-up carbon emissions, or produce lab-grown meat. Although these may be potential short-term solutions and seem as though they may provide some relief, these technological proposals reflect the same anthropocentric model of thinking that landed us in this situation; that humans have the power of influence and manipulation. A quote by Catherine Keller in *A Political Theology of Climate Change* further highlights the importance of engaging in such a discussion. She states in reference to the precarious nature of how much time we have to engage with this problem, “I hadn’t paid attention to U.S. Glaciers before. Now I learned that of the 150 glaciers that existed in the park in the late nineteenth century, only 25 remained. Global warming is taking them out.”⁴⁶ Keller continues to go on to state that Daniel Fagre, a research ecologist and director of the Climate Change in Mountain Ecosystems Project, predicts that all of the glaciers will have died by 2030. Glaciers have their significance in maintaining fresh water sources as well as storing carbon, but what troubles me are the undeniable unknown

⁴⁶ Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a new Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). 70.

consequences of rapidly losing these parts of the earth's ecosystem. I include this section to not only re-emphasize the severity of the dilemma presented, but also represent the notion that time is not a luxury provided in this context. I believe an essential and immediate shift in recognition and understanding is necessary for real change to occur.

The final chapter of the thesis is inspired by a notion of deep ecology, which suggests that a vital shift in consciousness is necessary within the individual to bring about any form of real change. This form of ecological recognition is rooted in the spirit that our attitudes and beliefs regarding the natural environment directly contribute to how we choose to engage with it. In this chapter, I will continue to build upon the work of Aldo Leopold (1887—1948), with his findings in ecology and his holistic metaphysics to continue the journey of creating a new language to engage with the natural world. Leopold was an American philosopher, naturalist, and conservationist who is widely known for his engagement with environmental ethics, and his focus on human relation to the land. I will also constructively bring into conversation with feminist care ethics through Carol Gilligan and Vrinda Dalmiya and expand this comparative dialogue to environmental care utilizing the work of process ecofeminists, Jea Sophia Oh and Catherine Keller to further create a moral ontology where the individual is enmeshed in a moral relationality to the other. Upon this moral framework the argument will be made that humans have an ethical duty to respond to these relationalities towards the natural world to help heal and care in the ways we recognize how.

7. Deep Ecology and Communities

I found a deep ecological connection to Zen Buddhism. A scholar of Zen Buddhism, Simon James states,

The central intuition of deep ecology... is the idea that there is no firm ontological divide in the field of existence. In other words, the world is simply not divided up into independently existing subjects or objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between the human and nonhuman realms. Rather all entities are constituted by their relationships.⁴⁷

Here we are able to hear the echoes of the established interconnectivity previously discussed in this thesis. Deep ecology takes those same core philosophies and turns the lens inward towards the subjective experience of the individual. Deep ecology recognizes the same metaphysical conclusions reached, and suggests that obtainment of these philosophies would necessarily result in a shift in individual attitudes and consciousness regarding the natural environment. This would be a shift towards a state of being where the deep interconnection with the natural world is realized. Once this change has been made, it necessarily follows that an individual will have altered behavior in terms of their interaction with the world around them as it would no longer be seen as a separate, isolated entity. To further appreciate this notion of deep ecology we can refer back to Indra's net. An entity in question may be seen to represent a jewel found within this net, and following the entity would reflect all other entities within its own being. The last line of James I quoted above signifies the truth of interconnectedness of all, as all entities necessarily

⁴⁷ James, Simon P. *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*. The Ashgate World Philosophies Series. Edited by Robert C. Solomon David E. Cooper, Kathleen M. Higgins, Purushottama Bilimoria (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 76.

reflect all others. If an individual comes upon this realization of interconnectedness, they would be increasingly careful of the actions carried out, as well as the potential resulting consequences. A small change in one jewel necessarily reflects the same change in all other jewels.

This type of dialect may potentially lead us towards an established environmental ethic, specifically that of Aldo Leopold. Leopold focuses on the concept of communities in regard to ethics, and how they exist as a primary driving force behind any form of ethical deliberation. He states in *A Sand County Almanac*,

There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it... The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but no obligations. The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.⁴⁸

When he is referring to the third element, he is referring to an ethical form that does not take the form of personal or social ethics. Typically this social environment would end at the horizon of city limits, or at the cusp of any human civilization. One of Leopold's objectives with his work was to extend the community outside of the limitation of human relations to include the natural world. We are able to begin to see the constructive contributions Hua-yen Buddhism may make for this discourse, as the community to be recognized becomes the entirety of being. From the framework of Indra's web, there would no longer be any exemptions from the communal lines. Now drawing on the conclusions reached in chapter three, it can be seen that human relationality extends far beyond societal interactions, and deeply effects many facets of existence outside of any one immediate community. The complimentary work done through Hua-yen takes us to the

⁴⁸ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 238.

halfway mark, as the grander, more holistic community is established. The next section will be dealing with the resulting consequences of such connections, and some of the possible ecological concerns that stem from them. The path towards an environmental ethic will be focusing on one specific set of communities that exists within the vast web of interdependencies, that being the community of relationships between the natural world and human beings.

8. Care Ethical Perspective

To confirm the values of community and following the care that may extend organically from them, I will weave into discussions care ethics as a source of inspiration. For this section, I will first draw on Carol Gilligan and Vrinda Dalmiya to establish a care ethical base, before expanding upon it towards eco-feminism using the work of Jea Sophia Oh and Catherine Keller. Care ethics, as initially proposed by Gilligan in 1982, places a large emphasis on contextualization, as well as seeing the moral agent as a relational self. This ethical perspective seeks to pull away from strict hierarchal ethical analysis which can take the form of justice ethics. In its place, care ethics emphasizes the relationality of any moral situation, and further suggests an intimate exploration of these connections before arriving at any moral decision. Gilligan states that “as a framework for moral decision, care is grounded in the assumption that self and other are interdependent.”⁴⁹ Gilligan’s notion of care reflects one of the fundamental pillars of care ethics, namely that humans are inherently connected with their surrounding environments. This becomes a crucial belief moving forward, as the self is no longer seen as a

⁴⁹ Carol Gilligan, "Moral Orientation and Moral Development," *Ethics: Classical Western Texts in Feminist and Multicultural Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 553.

separate operating entity, but necessarily becomes involved within the relationalities that are found along with it and the moral responsibilities that stem from these relationalities. From the care ethical perspective, it is the relationships that become the primary driving force of moral deliberation, as opposed to any strict set of moral rules. An example of how care ethics would function can be seen through that of Heinz's dilemma. In this ethical dilemma a woman is found on her deathbed and is in need of a specific drug. This drug however has become increasingly expensive due to the druggist hiking the price. The woman's husband Heinz, collected as much money as he could but could only cover half. The druggist then denied a partial payment of any sort and the husband was left without the drug. The question is then raised, should Heinz steal this drug for his wife? There are many variations of this dilemma but for the sake of our discussion this will suffice. In this scenario, an individual has to balance the responsibility he holds to his wife, his responsibility as a citizen, as well as his responsibility to the state. Each of these pulls him in a different direction and there are no clear rules that could be applied to produce the right answer. From the care perspective, dealing with this situation requires the immersion of the moral agent into a relational nexus. These relationalities are then to be explored and fully understood before arriving at the point where a proper moral decision could be made. A right or 'clear' answer is not always apparent from first pass and requires a deeper level of understanding before arriving at any one answer.

I will now bring Dalmiya into dialogue with her comparative thoughts on care ethics from her Indian philosophical background to extend the conversation of care ethics. In her work, *Caring to Know: Comparative Care Ethics*, Dalmiya defines the activity of care as "fulfilling

needs within webs of relationships.”⁵⁰ These are the webs that are recognized as paramount in ethical deliberations through care ethics. I argue that these same inter-relationalities may be demonstrated by drawing back on the previous discussion of Indra’s web. The extended relationships through the perspective of Hua-yen establish the ‘web of relationship’ between humans and nature. Dalmiya seeks to better our own lives and the lives of our most vulnerable by engaging in a comparative analysis with Indian Epics. A story found in the *Mahābhārata*⁵¹ which reflects the care ethical perspective can be seen through the archery teacher Drona. The teacher devised a contest in which two princes, Yudhisthira and Arjuna, had to pierce the eye of a decoy parrot. They were both posed the question as to what they saw before firing the arrow. Arjuna responded that he only saw the eye, while Yudhisthira saw the branch the parrot was on, the tree, the sky, and the clouds surrounding the parrot’s eye. Yudhisthira was able to see the parrot through a holistic lens where parts were not excluded, and the whole was taken into consideration. Although Yudhisthira failed in the sport of archery, his capability to see the contextual placement of the parrot led him to lead a greater moral life than his fellow prince. This story reflects the crucial component of acting from a care ethical perspective, a recognition for the whole. Yudhisthira’s mindfulness of everything in this situation can be further recognized as a widening of perspective, apart from the narrow recognition of the eye in and of itself.⁵²

Through this adoption of a wider angle lens of care, I propose to expand these same widenings towards nature, and further to extend our own horizons in regard to how we care for

⁵⁰ Vrinda Dalmiya, *Caring to Know: Comparative Care Ethics, Feminist Epistemology, and the Mahabharata* (India: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵¹ The *Mahābhārata* is one of two great Sanskrit epics which focuses on the five Pandava brothers and the ethical situations they find themselves in throughout the stories.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

the natural world. Here we are able to recognize that the broadening of such understanding is a crucial component to care ethics through the comparative lens of the *Mahābhārata*, and this very broadening can be utilized in a further extension of communities. In this next section, I will make this expansion towards nature through the use of Oh and Keller to establish a process ecofeminist perspective of care.

9. Extension to Eco-Care

For this section, I will operate on the view that the moral agent is a relational being, and drawing on the conclusions reached in chapter 3, extend these relationalities out past human relationships and towards the relationship with the natural world. Keller contends with how this relationality takes form as well as how humans are best able to engage with it. In her work, *A Political Theology of the Earth*, Keller explores the position of human responsibility towards the environment through the lens of care to both theorize and furthermore mobilize against the pressing climate change epidemic. She brings into discussion an “*ethos of interconnectedness*” and seeks to expand this ethos further. Keller states,

The planet does not supersede the multiple interhuman crises – of race, migration, sexuality, and economics – overheating at their own speeds of crashing immediacy. Instead, it locates them all in the same home, the planetary oikos of our ecosociality- no take outs, no exceptions. We cannot hold them in relationship all to each other unless we take in their common matter, indeed their material undercommons. To teach such earthen entanglement will not prevent great

emergencies of climate change; but it fosters, it grounds, the emergence of a complex planetary public.⁵³

Here we are able to see the unifying force underlying the ethos of care towards the natural world. From her process ecofeminist perspective, Keller suggests that through a common recognition of our interconnected nature, a merging may take form towards the pressing and precarious nature of our environmental situation. We have one home (Greek: *οἶκος*; *oikos*) of which we all mutually share and take part in. And as Keller states, there are no exceptions to this. Through this eco-feminist perspective, all individuals inhabiting this planet have this planetary bond. This is where ‘eco-care’ takes its form as Keller emphasizes that an acknowledgment and respect for these planetary bonds is what may be needed to form a like-minded community where change may be possible. Upon this recognition, Keller calls for a new mode of being which does not signify a totalizing oneness, but rather an appeal to complex human interdependence with the biosphere. She states in reference to Hua-yen ontology to further express her acceptance of interdependence, “Chinese Hua-yen Buddhist drew inspiration from the image of Indra’s net to express the intercausation and interpenetration of all beings.”⁵⁴ I also seek to draw inspiration from this image to further engage with a new language of being which encompasses such intimate interconnection with the surrounding world. This human interdependence can also be further recognized through the lens of *sunyata*

⁵³ Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a new Public*, 72.

⁵⁴ See Keller’s essay in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, 103.

(emptying) in Buddhism, as every entity that is produced or consumed in some way shape or form finds its origins out of the earth we inhabit.

Furthermore, an argument may be presented here regarding the caring and nurturing aspects the earth and planet have provided for us growing up as humans. The food we eat, the water we drink, the sun that gives life are all forms of care bestowed upon us from the natural world, and now the roles are potentially reversed. We may be seen to recognize the earth that we inhabit as a nurturing and caring entity in our lives, it has provided us with food, water, and shelter to allow us to exist. It may be said that the earth cared for us when we were existing in a vulnerable state, now the tables have turned and the call for compassion has been made from nature in the form of ecological destruction. I will expand on these ideas using Oh's extension of familial bonds through the lens of ecofeminism. In her work *A Comparative Ecofeminist Perspective of Care for Planetary Family*, Oh states, "Extension of family should go beyond the human family by recognizing humans as a part of the web of life and the entirety of humanity as an integrated body."⁵⁵ With this quote Oh is operating from the perspective that care is an act that stems from a realization of 'relationality,' and that this relationality may be expanded outwards. In her book, *A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West*, Oh emphasizes nature's 'fecundity' in every microcosmic entity toward a greater macrocosmic planetary family:

Beyond the dichotomy of masculine and feminine without the organ of man, everything is endlessly causing and creating every other thing in the process of becoming. In this sense, I would refer to everybody, both at the micro and macro levels, as a maternal body; birthing, dying, and renewing itself.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Jea Sophia Oh, "A Comparative Ecofeminist Perspective of Care for Planetary Family," (*Journal of Philosophy of Emotion* 2, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.33497/2020.winter>. 6.

⁵⁶ Jea Sophia Oh, *A Postcolonial Theology of Life: Planetarity East and West* (Upland; Sopher Press, 2011), 50.

I develop upon her notion of nature's fecundity to make the argument that we should recognize a maternal bond with this planet, extending a previously strictly familial relation towards the environment. We arrived from the womb of our mothers, but we also arrived from the earth as the womb of life, receiving the necessary nutrients and resources that we required to survive. From this fecundity of nature, we can further recognize the significance and intimacy involved in acting from a place of compassion towards the earth. Even with this recognition, it remains important not to fully privilege one side of the binary between masculine and feminine, but rather recognize the ways in which they interweave with and complement one another. Oh states in a response to essentializing feminism that, "if we emphasize only femininity, it can be dangerous and problematic to see a woman only through the lens of her biological function rather than by appreciating the diverse aspects of personality, and the range of possibilities for her besides that of being a mother."⁵⁷ Oh argues that adopting such a perspective necessarily limits both female and male roles, as femininity and fertility may be recognized in men as well as non-organic matter. From this the earth may be recognized as having both of these attributes, existing in a state of dynamic becoming similarly to the becoming defined by Whitehead. The earth was present and willing to provide for us in our most vulnerable state, and now the possibility exists that a role reversal may take place. It can be argued that we have a duty to honor the earth the same way it nurtured and honored us, by re-emphasizing and re-centralizing the focus of the conversation on our relationality with the natural world. Through the lens of care ethics, these relationalities, our interconnectivity with nature, is to be felt and explored prior to making any sort of moral deliberation. I believe these are the connections that are necessary to be

⁵⁷ Ibid., 49.

re-established for any real systemic change to occur in how we perceive and interact with the natural world.

Through Dalmiya and Gilligan we were able to establish what the care ethical perspective looks like as well as how it functions. From there, we were able to expand the strands of relationality to the natural world in various forms through Keller's 'ethos of interconnectedness,' as well as Oh's 'extension of familial care.' Drawing back on the previously established metaphysical frameworks, we can begin to realize through the Buddhist *sunyata* and Whitehead's deep interconnection that such bonds take form. The recognition of these bonds are paramount, and as argued can be extended to the natural world. Through a shift in perspective to a more eco-centric model, humans begin to exist in symbiosis with nature, resulting in a moral obligation to care and nurture the bonds we hold.

I now refer to a study conducted in 2016 which explores the relationship between attitudes towards nature and actions. It has been shown in this study that compassion elicits moral actions across all moral domains, including the environment. In a paper titled *Feelings for the Suffering of Others and the Environment* by Pfattheicher, Sassenrath, and Schindler, research was conducted that revealed compassion was positively related to pro environmental issues, and reported donations to nature or environmental organizations.⁵⁸ This study was conducted by assessing individuals in regards to their environmental attitudes as well as their compassionate tendencies towards other humans through sampling participants at a university. In this study it is stated, "results revealed compassion was indeed positively related to pro environmental values,

⁵⁸ Stefan Pfattheicher, Claudia Sassenrath, and Simon Schindler, "Feelings for the Suffering of Others and the Environment: Compassion Fosters Proenvironmental Tendencies," *Environment and Behavior* 48(7) 929- 945 (2016).

pro environmental intentions, and reported donations to nature or environmental organizations.”⁵⁹ This aspect of compassion can be reconnected with the sentiments in chapter three regarding the phenomena of reality. For this research, compassion was defined as being moved by the sufferings of others, as well as having empathetic concern for the other. For this thesis, I will further expand on this definition. To be moved by another’s suffering, one must first have some form of relational bond with that entity, and furthermore one must care about that bond. Compassion is to be understood here as recognizing the underlying noumenal that interpenetrates all of existence and binds it together. Through the recognition of the interconnected other, and the implied duty of care, the study shows that individuals had a change in their behavior regarding the environment and interacted with it in a more positive manner. The research also states in the discussion section that nature was not explicitly stated to be in a state of suffering, however they still found that compassion for other humans promoted pro-environmental intentions. This ties back to Keller’s point of a planetary public, as fostering care for one translates outwards to realm of nature. What this research suggests is that an adoption of a care ethical perspective through cultivating compassion towards humans and nature would in theory have direct positive consequences on the natural world.⁶⁰ Similarly, introducing Kuanyin as the Bodhisattva of compassion, one who chose not to be Buddha but chose to stay with us for sharing our sufferings, Oh further elaborates on the theme of compassion by recognizing the self-giving love of the individual engaged in compassion as ‘co-sufferer.’ She states, “Compassion means being with the sufferer and becoming the other.” Through this engagement the self necessarily enfolds into the other to hold and feel the suffering being exhibited. This same

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

enfoldment may be applied externally past human relations. This other may be recognized as any sentient being, and I will make the claim that nature may take this form of the other.⁶¹

With these relationships established, I suggest the overt harm and damage done to the environment as a visceral cry for help. I contend that the environmental and ecological harm being done is the distinct and apparent need that is being portrayed within the relationship we find ourselves involved in, and from the care perspective, it becomes evident the right action involves alleviating the harm being done. I believe a shift towards this care perspective is necessarily implied through any sort of shift in consciousness towards a standpoint of deep ecology. Although having such experiences with nature are deeply subjective experiences, I believe there still exists ways to strive towards and potentially reach that state of consciousness. The next section will be exploring a few practical applications of how individuals are able to reach such a state using the work of a Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and his work around integration of such philosophies into the individual.

10. Interbeing

The last section of this paper will be drawing on the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master, and his teachings in *Interbeing*. This will be done in order to discuss some of the practical applications regarding reaching this new metaphysical framework, as well as guidelines regarding how individuals are able to reach such a framework. Prior to transitioning to

⁶¹ Jea Sophia Oh (2012). “Hybridity of Kuanyin and Mary, Maternal Sacrifice and Salvation: A Comparative Theological Study”, *The Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*(9), 18-24. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/phil_facpub/.

Hanh, Nagarjuna can be brought back into conversation with his doctrine of the two truths. These consists of the conventional truth (*samvrti-satya*) and the ultimate truth (*paramartha-satya*). Nagarjuna explains how these truths do not oppose each other, but mutually imply each other in Chapter 24:

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significant of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved.⁶²

This chapter of Nagarjuna's *Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*) represents that our starting point towards truth needs to be within the conventional world, since that is the thing that motivates our practice. This conventional truth, namely that things in everyday existence lack intrinsic essence, may only be obtained through dependence on everyday practice. This truth expresses the form and distinction that we experience on a daily basis. Nagarjuna's *Middle Way* of practice have two primary beliefs, specifically that of cognition and compassion. Cognition may be recognized as meditation on emptiness or on the true nature of things, while the compassionate dimension focuses on a path of giving. This is where Hanh will be introduced as a further means to reaching this conventional truth to lead to the ultimate truth through that of certain practices as well as his thoughts on becoming a compassionate being.

In this aspect, Hanh can be used as a bridge between understanding and experience due to his incredible capacity to translate the seemingly ineffable into words, and his willingness to speak to be heard. Although there are key differences between Zen Buddhism and Mahayana

⁶² Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, 68.

Buddhism⁶³, for the sake of this discussion it can be understood that their primary premises regarding the metaphysical nature of reality are exceedingly similar. Hanh states, “To be in touch with reality of the world means to be in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms.”⁶⁴ Hanh is positing here a similar ecological conclusion in terms of interconnectedness which was previously discussed. In addition to the human interdependence, he is extending the same principles to more than human realms. In this quote he is establishing the relational aspects that are present between the human being and the world around them to better frame the conversation for understanding how an individual is to experience this sort of truth. Hanh takes this one step further and states that there is no separation between the inner mind and the external world, stating that they belong to the same fundamental reality. He references this relational existence between the mind and the world in attempts to remove the strongly constructed barriers that exist between the two, and push past the preconceived philosophies of separated entities. This is what he refers to as the “true mind”⁶⁵ and claims that coming to realize the true mind has the potential to lead an individual to a reservoir of untapped compassion and understanding. This understanding would stem from the realization that the individual is an intrinsic part of the cosmos, intimately connected with the on-goings around them; the universe is the individual, and the individual is the universe. This compassion for the reality around an individual upon recognition of the deep ties that run through is what Hanh calls “Interbeing”. Another way to frame “Interbeing” would be the process of the integration of the

⁶³ Zen Buddhism exists as a subset of Mahayana Buddhism and although there are no doctrinal differences, Zen places a much heavier emphasis on meditation in regard to paths to enlightenment.

⁶⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1998).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

individual and the universal. This same notion may be seen through the previously mentioned interpenetration in regard to Hua-yen Buddhism. Interpenetration in a mode of being in which multiplicity merges into unity, where each event or being reflects the totality of the whole. It can be seen here that Hanh is expressing a similar attitude as the individual becomes one with the universal, and simultaneously reflects back the entirety of the universe.

Hanh also deals with the prospect as to how individuals are able to reach these realizations about themselves and the world around them. In his book, *Interbeing*, he outlines fourteen mindfulness trainings that can be adopted as a way of being or existing to assist individual in reaching a state in which they are able to engage and interact with the world through a new metaphysical lens of interdependence and becoming. Among the fourteen, being of compassion for yourself and those around you upon the realization of the deep inter-relational bonds that weave existence together are seen as reoccurring themes.⁶⁶ This compassion once again stems from the realizations of the *sunyata* within the self and all other beings.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17.

Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings:

1. Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance
2. Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions
3. Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others
4. Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop compassion and find ways out of suffering
5. Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame
6. Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering
7. Aware that life is available only in the present moment and that it is possible to live happily in the here and now
8. Aware that lack of communication always brings separation and suffering
9. Aware that words can create suffering or happiness
10. Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the practice of understanding and compassion
11. Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society

V. Conclusion

In the previous section I sought to extend the interconnection and dynamics of *sunyata* outward to the environment and in doing so advocated to draw on a well of compassion stemming from that relationality. The stated relationality was argued to have its due importance from the standpoint of care ethics, and then was further expanded to the natural environment with the use of eco-care. The conclusions reached in that chapter which will be echoed once again in the conclusion is the moral responsibility presented before us in direct response to the experienced suffering of the natural world. In the second chapter of this thesis I sought to establish a metaphysical platform through a comparative engagement of Whiteheadian thought and Mahayana Buddhist ontology. This largely suggested a deeply interconnected and ephemeral state of being where relationality was taken as paramount in exploratory investigation. I next transitioned into a discussion of Hua-yen Buddhist thought and explored the resulting implications in respect to human orientation towards nature. This chapter sought to establish humans and nature on the same metaphysical plane of being, and further emphasized the deep ontological ties that exist in the web of relationality humans find themselves in. With the strands of connection formed, the last chapter brought into conversation a call for a moral urgency in the

12. Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict

13. Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression

14. Aware that sexual relations motivated by craving cannot dissipate the feeling of loneliness but will create more suffering, frustration, and isolation

form of a care ethical analysis. The previously established strands were given due moral concern as the extension of the community of human interaction was extended past human society to include the natural world.

A hike in the mountainous woods of Vermont reveals the initial inspiration for this research. Upon pulling a piece of plastic out of a stream, I felt then what I better understand now—the easing sigh of relief from the natural world, much like a human response to having a splinter removed. I emphasize this relief as the foundation for change. The current ecological crisis requires a fundamental change in our attitudes and behaviors towards nature, thorough examination of the present discourse is equally urgent. One potential source of this change may be found in the recognition of a deeply interconnected, inseparable nature of reality. We humans exist in direct relationship to the land we live on as it provides us with resources and nutrients necessary for our survival. To maintain this symbiotic relationship, it follows that we must treat this very same land with equal respect and kindness that we extend to our fellow humans. If we truly are the streams and the mountains, then we must be able to open our eyes and see that the harm being done to the world around us is harm being done upon ourselves. Examples of this includes, further engaging with our present environments, surrounding ourselves with nature and opening ourselves up to such subjective experiences. Extending beyond mere proximity with nature, we may also look to engage in compassion practices as a way of cultivating our innate, inner well of love and understanding for the world around us. Practical approaches can be as simple as developing habits that support local farming and production practices. Non-industrialized businesses have a deeper, more intimate understanding of the land they care for, rooted in an insight of the symbiotic nature of ecosystems further. Therefore, supporting local agricultural business is just one pragmatic effort which assists in preventing unnecessary harm to

the land. This would further take the power away from globalized food networks which in many cases utterly devastate environmental conditions both in America and abroad. Outside of consumption practices, one may further reflect on their own actions towards the natural world. Although it is unrealistic to propose a completely non-harmful stance towards nature, small adjustments such as picking up trash in nature can go a long way in the realm of Indra.

Lastly, it seems that merely grasping these concepts in theory is not enough. Here I present Hua-yen vision as a tool to bring about realization of what was previously only theory. To live in this type of reality means to alter one's engagement with the world, to alter one's moral and ethical stance, and finally, perhaps most importantly, to incorporate such realizations into one's own being. This is the way in which I propose we relate to the infinite other.

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