

# The “Western Illusion of Human Nature” in Marshal Sahlins and Buddha-Nature as Immanent Principle of Universal Awakening In Indo-Tibetan Buddhism

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## Abstract

The book of Marshal Sahlins the Western Illusion of human nature refers to the theories of human nature, developed in the west on the base of the dualistic separation of nature from culture, which constituted a foundation for the Western Metaphysics of Power. The view that nature was something that needed to be subjugated by civilised order and the State, carried particular implications for the forms of life of subjectivities, collectives and nature. My aim in this paper, is following Sahlins' method, to provide a counter-paradigm of an alternative anthropology, based on the Indo-Tibetan theory of buddha-nature; a non-dualistic theory that does not separate between human and its “other”, but acknowledges as humane, a nature that is shared with all other beings. Tathāgatagarbha, the buddha-nature, is understood here in both ways, as a potential for awakening of beings that have not yet realised their nature due to circumstantial obscurations, and as the already awakened nature of the primordial luminous mind of budhahood that is beyond conditions. In this paper, I will try to balance between two different approaches, one emphasising the “self-empty” (rang stong), that is a negative aspect of buddha-nature (Madhyamaka), and another, emphasising the “other- empty” (gzhan stong), that is a positive aspect of buddha-nature (Yogācāra), with the aim to show the libertarian and egalitarian political implications that, as an anti-essentialist and immanent philosophy, the theory of Tathāgatagarbha may have.

**Keywords:** Human Nature; Buddha-Nature; Immanence; Emptiness; Dependent Co-Arising; Non-Duality; Freedom

## Introduction

In his book *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* [1], the anthropologist Marshal Sahlins suggests that the perception of human nature, as it developed in the Western world, was based on a par excellence “Western” juxtaposition between nature and culture, an approach which he declares as one of West's core metaphysical constructions. Sahlins rightly traces in the fear of anarchy the “sword of Damocles” of a negative understanding of human nature. On the other hand, the author provides us with examples of alternative concepts of human nature related with different forms of coexistence and reciprocity which marginally developed in the Western world, as much as in other cultures and tribes. The latter, for example, do not tie human nature to some innate antisocial animality, but rather connect it to culture and social life. Therefore, alternative perceptions of human nature show how restricted and partial is the specific perception of human nature as egoic and aggressive.

Sahlins shows that particular anthropological approaches of human nature result in analogous political consequences. In the

West, most theories of human nature aimed at the subjugation of nature and subjectivity. My aim in this paper is, after reviewing the main problematic of Sahlins' book, to provide an Indo-Tibetan paradigm of human nature that escapes the Metaphysics of Power as derived from the polarity between nature and culture. I will be referring to the Buddhist concept of buddha-nature, the tathāgatagarbha (de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po) [2], often translated as “embryo” or “womb” (garbha) of the tathāgata, the buddha. The concept is tied to the nature of the mind as intrinsically pure and luminous (unconditioned), though it may appear to beings that have not realised their nature, as defiled (conditioned). Based, methodologically, on these two aspects, I will focus respectively on the ontological/ phenomenological and socio-political dimensions of buddha-nature, as a human nature that, nevertheless, is not distinctively humane. Applying to the philosophical categories of “emptiness” and “dependent origination”, buddha-nature is essentially “self-less” and “empty”. This means that albeit being the primordial, universal and ever-present nature of awakening, it cannot be substantialised as such. Methodologically, the

Madhyamaka view of negative “empty mind” and the Yogachara view of positive “luminous mind” are both maintained, not only as Buddhist philosophic-historical phases but as ontological and phenomenological realities. Buddha-nature is presented here as a counter-paradigm in respect to what Sahlins has proclaimed about the Western mainstream perception of human nature. I will show that, as an immanent principle of awakening within all sentient beings, but also as an anthropological condition, the concept of buddha-nature may carry particular socio-political consequences which evoke mainly freedom and equality.

### The western illusion of human nature

The view that the human being is inclined above all towards the fulfilment of its natural desires and is driven by its natural tendency for self-interest and power, cannot but justify, from the perspective of political power, the application of measures, which accordingly aim to subjugate and control the human passions. This goal, in its turn, enforces the hierarchical constitution of power, as well as the lawful enforcement of violence, in order to succeed the constrain of human passions and antagonisms. This idea is known in the Western thought as ‘Hobbessian’, a label which has been attributed to many intellectual forefathers, such as Thucydides, and through St. Augustine, Machiavelli and the authors of Federalist Papers to our contemporaneous Sociobiologists. Sahlins structures his book upon the positions of these thinkers whose essentialist illusions about human nature politically have supported the perpetual conflict between hegemony and equality.

As aforementioned, the main representative of the idea of natural condition as threatening for the human life, seeking restrain through the discipline power of a ruler, is Hobbes. Hobbes describes the natural condition as solitary, adverse and bestial. His view is inspired by his ideological forefather, the political historian Thucydides [3]. The turbulent times that he experiences, witnessing the transference of adversarial war from one city to another, made Thucydides characterize human nature an illness, the main responsible for the tribulations and the fall of the Greek Polis. However, Thucydides does not exclude, like Hobbes, History as a factor of causality. Whereas Hobbes transfers what he describes as brutal condition within the gulfs of the civilised society, as if there were no societal bonds before the rise of the modern State [4].

Sahlins attributes to the philosophical connection of Thucydides, Hobbes and John Adams, the basic coordinates of the “Metaphysical Triangle” of anarchy, hierarchy and equality (Sahlins, 2008, 4). While Hobbes draws from Thucydides the characteristics of natural condition, Adams draws from Hobbes the conviction that in human beings selfish interests are more powerful than the social. The difference between Thucydides and the latter two philosophers is that, while for Hobbes salvation stems from a powerful sovereign, who imposes himself through violence, and rules through fear, for Adams order is imposed through the organization of the Republic and redeeming separation of powers. Adams Republic, while giving power to people, combines the three polities, democracy,

oligarchy and monarchy, in order to avoid overindulgence of each one (Sahlins, 2008, 6).

According to Sahlins, the dialectic contradiction between hierarchy and equality is expressed in the West in the long-discourses and institutional conflict between monarchic and populist sovereignty. Even though the two philosophers start from the same point, they reach contradictory political solutions. Nevertheless, in Sahlins’s view, the two forms of political organization, on the one hand, present a complementarity via contradistinction, that is, according to Hegel, every opposite embraces and perpetuates its counterpart through its negation. On the other hand, they are both founded upon the dualistic scheme nature/ culture, placing themselves on the side of culture, which implies that the end of the war in nature has to be put with tyranny. The spirit of Republic and absolutism will shape the inter-temporal and opposing construction of co-dependent oppositions, which will be exchanging themselves for long. Sahlins maintains that the dualistic contradiction between nature and culture, supported by hegemonic sovereignty as much as by the republican structure, is itself what supports the whole edifice (Sahlins, 2008, 13-14). For Sahlins the ideas of these three thinkers cannot but express the politics of “self-contempt”.

Likewise, similar dualistic opposition is traced in ancient Greek literature in the cosmogony of Hesiod as opposed to the first principle of Anaximander, for example. The cosmic order of Hesiod in *Works and Days* (“Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι”) is dependent on fight, violence and injustice. The beginning of order in the world starts with the imposition of Zeus upon Cronus and the Titans. In this way Zeus becomes the ruler of the universal world. The titans constitute a tribe very similar to the “prehuman” natural condition; unbound forces which seem to represent something of the untamed element that is part of the human species. The evil and the tendency to mutual extermination seems to be controlled here only by justice and “ill hope”, as Hesiod held. The Titans, as Sahlins concludes, establish the Western concept of politics in the form of constrain on the anti-social person in an ancient folklore (Sahlins, 2008, 18). And he goes on with the comparison of cosmic law and politics, where Zeus represents the king. On the other hand, mutuality, equality and collectivity constitute the ideals of the Polis, which is offended however, by competitive individual interests, that will finally lead to its tragic fall. This is the Athenian Polis, womb of the conflict of law and self-interest, as Sahlins comments.

Nevertheless, Sahlins shows how Anaximander of Miletus, the Natural philosopher, had incorporated the principle of equality within a cosmological understanding of conflict and balance of the opposites. Here self-interest is understood as principle of correct order in the universe through the interaction of equal and opposing forces. In the universe of Anaximander no element imposes itself upon another. Hence, the primordial natural element of origin is not fire, or wind, etc. like in the rest of the Natural philosophers, but the apeiron, what is infinit, boundless or uncountable. What is

essential in the Anaximandean cosmology is that cosmic stability is succeeded without the imposition of external sovereignty.

Instead of a world which is dominated from the above, by an all mighty God, the universe of Anaximander is a self-regulating natural system which is controlled by the reciprocal give and take of equal elements which constitute it (Sahlins, 2008, 25). Albeit being equal and opposite no one is able to overcome the others. The elements offer reparations to each other for their unjust invasion to each other, a process which gives birth to things (phenomena); even though as time goes by, all things dissolve back to their constitutive elements. Sahlins refers to the term *isonomia* (ἰσονομία), that according to Gregory Vlastos, applies to the cosmic justice that Anaximander introduces. As a paradigm of civic-political justice, on the antipode of the Aristocratic, monarchical justice of Hesiod, the universe of Anaximander represents the democratic model of *isonomia* which is able to preserve justice in a community in way of equal distribution of power among its members (Sahlins, 2008, 26). However, the perception of ancient Greek Cosmology or Physiology, by contemporary analysts, as a reflection of politics, consists for Sahlins a rather simplifying reduction which probably conceals temporal and dialectical relations (Sahlins, 2008, 31). The essential point is that for ancient Greeks the boundaries between society and nature were not so rigidly demarcated as they are in contemporary scholarly thought (Sahlins, 2008, 32). A more robust demarcation started from the fifth century with the Sophist discourse on the duality between *physis* (φύσει) and *nomos* (νόμῳ), as also Agamben observes, who as well acknowledges the beginning of Western metaphysics of power in the ancient Greece [5].

In modern history the dualistic split between nature and culture is perpetuated in Rousseau as much as in Hobbes. Both privilege nature over culture even though by taking antithetical thesis on the natural (Sahlins, 2008, 37). Sahlins, having shown how the pessimistic Hobbessian concept of human nature complemented with the Christian tradition of fallen man, together with realism and ethical naturalism established for the American revolutionaries their Constitution, explains how individuation and self-interest, as rights given from God, finally justified political representation, self-interest and inequality as societal conditions (Sahlins, 2008, 74-83).

Therefore, Sahlins offers examples of non-Western societies in order to overturn the alleged objectivity and ecumenical accuracy of the distorted Western ideas of human nature. By quoting Philip Descola (Sahlins, 2008, 88), he emphasizes that only in the Western civilization is found the possibility of innate natural ferocity within the human being and the external imposition of sociability in terms of suppression. This deluded perception about the human being is compatible with the general treatment of the objectified natural world as it has been developed by the Western subjectivity, leaving us with a "soulless universe". Christianity aimed towards this direction since it condemned the paganist worship of nature

"leaving it with a theology of transcendent divinity and the ontology of a purely material world" (Sahlins, 2008, 89). Sahlins aims to break the Western prejudice about the primitive society as contradicting with the civilised world. Hence, he puts forth alternative paradigms of sociability as innate in the human nature, where the dualistic split between nature/ culture simply does not apply.

Contrary to the Western paradigm, Sahlins refers to cultures, where the whole of the natural world is being perceived as social in its own way. According to these, natural beings hold networks of social relations just like humans, often considering them as "persons". In order to understand them, instead of a materialistic approach, Sahlins suggests a gnoseological one. This implies not that their understanding has not yet transcended myth, but rather that their gnosis is formed by totally different experiences, such as those we find in dreams and visions. The world that is revealed through shamanic ecstatic transformations, myths, spells or rituals, meditations etc., is totally different from the world that is destined to be exploited, treated as inert matter. Insofar magical power of words and ritual performances are constituted by a whole range of rhetoric with their own semiotics as addressed to - and seeking to persuade - persons other than human, their technologies appear less mystifying and go far beyond technicality. By engaging in an inter-personal dialogue with nature, these peoples reveal everyday praxis as poetics (Sahlins, 2008, 92). However, Sahlins breaks with the Western tradition of the polarity between nature/ culture by subscribing on the side of culture. A stance that was not unknown to the ancient Greeks. It seems like that even for him, it is impossible to transcend the dilemma [6].

### **Buddha-nature as emptiness and luminosity or in-between conventional and absolute**

The way the world is perceived is connected to the way we, humans, perceive our own self. In the West the Freudian Psychology, by acknowledging an inherent tendency to aggression, gave Hobbes' empiricist epistemology a scientific cover, and tied it to a sense of strong identity, that is the ego, formed as societal self, as distinct from "nature" which was represented by the instinctual self, the Id. However, Transpersonal Psychology succeeds to show the fluidity and the relative character of the limits of ego, which basically are constructed socially, can be modified, and even dissolved under specific ontological and gnoseological conditions, without having to result to an ethical collapse. As Transpersonal Psychologists confirm, the content and the structure of the sense of the self that someone might have, could be different from the conventional identity that is based on ego. This view is found usually in traditions that differ from the Western one and the traditional Western psychological theories. Buddhism, for example, accepts that the maintenance of the sense of the ego and the sense of a separated self is basically illusory. Instead, the fundamental nature of self can be found in the insights that one obtains through the stages of the path to Enlightenment [7].

The Buddhist perception of human nature is bound with an original potentiality of awakening. The nature of the self or the being, is related to the nature of the mind, which, even though contaminated with defilements, in its original form is pure, constituting thus, the “pure mind of self-nature” (*prakṛti-prabhāsvara-citta*) [8] which will reveal itself as radiant, luminous or clear light mind (*prabhāsvara-citta*, ‘od gsal gyi sems) [9]. Luminosity refers to the inconceivable qualities of the enlightened mind. The human nature is buddha-nature, only that this nature is not exclusively humane. All living beings share the seed of *Tathāgatagarbha* [10], that is they partake in the potentiality of Buddhahood, which in essence is the deeper luminous and empty dimension of the mind. This capacity is rooted in the conviction, that the ego does not constitute the original self. Moreover, what characterizes the self, is emptiness, which allows it to be fluid, malleable. However, according to the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid*), it is also held, that persons and phenomena lack any ultimate existence or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), they are selfless (*anātman*). As the philosopher Nāgārjuna maintained, emptiness itself is empty of essence, that is it is empty of itself [11]. Therefore, it does not constitute self-existent void as another substantial substitute of essential qualia. However, according to the doctrine of dependent co-arising everything is inter-connected. The buddha-nature being itself an empty “womb”, connotes an all embracing nexus, that connects everything in a divine universal embrace, and albeit already present, awaits to be discovered.

Hence, the luminous, pure mind is constitutive of the ultimate. But the ultimate is depicted as an immanent reality. The buddha-nature, in the philosophical doctrine of *Yogācāra*, is identified with a particular type of consciousness, the basic consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*, *kun gzhi*), which can also be named “universal ground”. Therefore, the buddha-nature represents not only the potential for an awakened mind but the cognitive structure of awakening as well (Duckworth, 2015). For Mahāyāna School, a significant issue arises: how is it that the concept of universal emptiness (*śūnyatā*), as taught in the Madhyamaka School of Ārya Nāgārjuna, can be compromised with buddha-nature, as taught in the *Yogācāra* School? [12] It is because buddha-nature is identified with emptiness itself. Hence, as Candrakīrti sais, buddha-nature is selflessness. In this respect, Buddha nature is an indication for the lack of intrinsic nature of mind and reality. There can be two ways distinctive of emptiness. The first is being empty of that which is extrinsic, known as “other empty” (*gzhan stong*), and the second is being empty of that which is intrinsic, known as “self-empty” (*rang stong*). While the Buddha-nature is associated with both kinds of emptiness, in the third phase of teachings, even in the Madhyamaka as Duckworth maintains, it is especially related with the first kind of emptiness, as a positive ground of being. Therefore, it parallels a *Yogācāra* interpretation (Duckworth, 2015). It is considered to be empty of elements that is not, but not empty of what is positive qualities. Therefore, Buddha nature is what remains when defilements are removed.

In this respect, the luminous buddha-nature is always present, as an innate psychological, phenomenological and ontological dimension, but as it appears, is covered by stains caused by psychological, gnoseological and sensory factors, which have not gone through purification. These factors are considered responsible for the “deluded” perception of the self and the phenomenal world. This perception of the world is considered as the main obstacle to the realization of the factor of co-dependence and emptiness, not only of human existence, but of all other phenomena. From the perspective of the second turning of the wheel of dharma, emptiness constitutes the womb of indeterminacy which opens possibilities to all beings and situations, in constantly renewable modalities. The existence of a “nature”, however, need not be perceived as an affirmation of an essentialist tradition [13]. Since when we say something is empty, we mean that is empty of inherent existence, of essence. This implies it does not exist “by its own side”. This is not to say that it does not exist at all, but that it exists from the side of the observer or the perceiver as well. The notion of emptiness is related to “dependent origination” (*prītyasamutpāda*, *rten 'brel*). The term denotes connectivity between events; how phenomena that arise are dependent upon other phenomena, just like composites depend upon their parts and so forth (Garfield, 1994).

Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka tradition solve the problem of absolute and relative aspects of phenomena with the recognition of two truths (*satyadvaya*): the conventional (*saṃvṛti-satya*), and the ultimate (*paramārtha-satya*). The two truths are understood as two natures, a relative and an absolute, existing at the same time within phenomena, rather than a dichotomy of reality. The doctrine of two truths in a gnoseological approach can be seen as a pedagogical and epistemological tool in the context of *upāya*, skillful means. The conventional truth conceals the empty and inter-dependent nature of phenomena, projects substantiality into insubstantiality, permanence into impermanence. The absolute truth realizes the empty nature of reality and *prītyasamutpāda* as the all-pervasive principle of life and reveals the imputed character of phenomena understood in a metalinguistic manner [14].

As far as concerns the framework of the anthropological critique of the Western concept of human nature of this paper, it can be said that dependent co-arising reveals the factor of inter-connectedness not only insofar beings and particularly human beings connect with each other, but with their environment as well. In fact with all other beings, elements and phenomena in an expanding sphere that includes the whole cosmos. This understanding of co-dependency can justify what in other cultures entails a sense of sociability, in the sense that all beings are inter-connected. It may also raise an issue of accountability for humans insofar their thoughts and activities affect the environment and all other forms of life [15]. In this paper, I am not dealing with buddha-nature by means of the two truths of Madhyamaka, as I am inclined towards a more *Yogācāra* view. However, I attempt to balance methodologically in between the two. Nevertheless, the absolute aspect of truth can be seen in

buddha-nature as ever-present and empty, and the conventional, in the examination of buddha-nature in the light of socio-political conditions. Both of these sides are examined in the two chapters that follow.

### Ontological and phenomenological perspectives of buddha-nature

The ontology of emptiness and dependent co-arising, apart from its soteriological, gnoseological or scientific implications, may display political significance as well. The idea of selflessness may provide ethical argumentation for egalitarian and cooperative theories, movements and actions of solidarity. Towards this direction, indispensable ethical and epistemological concept of the Buddhist philosophy is bodhicitta, which describes the emotional and mental state of union of wisdom and compassion. Bodhicitta, as a two-fold elevated state of mind, constitutes the distinctive prerequisite for the unfolding of buddha-nature; it provides a way to progress in the path towards Enlightenment and is enlightened mind itself. Bodhicitta is also distinctive of the kind of motivation for action that a subject aiming to awakening may carry. Atiśa in his *Bodhipathapradīpa* and Tsong-kha-pa in his *Lam rim chen mo* describe the superior kind of practitioner aiming to Buddhahood: “The magnificent type aspires to become a buddha for the benefit of oneself and others by striking a delicate and precarious balance between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, a balancing act that a bodhisattva performs on a single pivotal point, namely, bodhicitta, characterised by *upāya* (or *karuṇā*) and *prajñā*” (Wangchuk, 2007, 37). It appears that compassion is the particular and appropriate mode to consciously connect with sentient beings, and this way of connecting constitutes a method for progress in the spiritual path.

Compassion, like many conceptual tools, can be also seen as analytical method for exploring and transforming human experience. According to some authors, often such categories, do not refer to the final reality, but, according as Maria Heim says, consist phenomenological and analytical tools that break down phenomena, in order to interpret the dynamic patterns of their interrelatedness and conditionality. In Pali literature, compassion (*karuṇā*) holds the position of one among the “four immeasurables” (*appamañña*), in the *Abhidhamma* (or *Abhidharma SKT*) text the *Vibhaṅga*. The four essential experiences are used as methods for intellectual and religious practice. The other three are loving kindness (*mettā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). These experiences, as they are expounded, for example in *Buddhagosa*, constitute practices to be cultivated in order to succeed the soteriological ends which his entire project entails [16]. These experiences and the attitude which they cultivate comes in striking opposition with the experience of identification of nature with something that needed to be dominated by means of rationalisation and exploitation. This stance led the Western world to the separation of the human being from the rest of the natural world, and provided justification for its violent imposition

upon nature. Buddhist Psychology does not negate the challenges that rise from the conventional mind, but provides technologies for the awakening, that may lead one, who takes them on, beyond constraint. A compassionate stance towards beings, opens humans up to the capacity for understanding, respect and union with what surrounds them; an attitude which, with the cultivation of wisdom (*prajñā*), takes them to the revelation of their awakened nature [17].

Furthermore, buddha-nature, as a condition applicable to all beings, points towards three principles: equality, inseparability, immanence. The argumentation Duckworth draws from the *Sublime Continuum* (*Ratnagotravibhaga*) by bodhisattva Maitreya, proves the immanence of buddha-nature as an ever-present principle of equality among beings and the buddha. Duckworth refers to a kind of teleological argument for buddha-nature, by explaining that if the union among the perfect and unchanging divinity and beings is placed in the future, this would contradict the unchanging primordial character of buddha-nature. Second, taking into account the characterization of the nature of reality, thusness or suchness (*de bzhin nyid, tathātā*), as indivisible, we can deduce from this indivisibility the immanence of the divinity which makes all beings cohere in the present cosmos. The buddha can be in the world due to the fact of indivisibility in the world. Furthermore, since there is no qualitative difference of what is unconditioned, the nature of the buddha cannot be different from that of a sentient being. This assumption is connected to another significant point in the *Mahāyāna*, that alleges the inseparability of cyclic existence and *nirvāṇa*, that is the ultimate inseparability of buddhas and sentient beings. Since suchness is unchanging, defilements which obscure this reality, are adventitious. Hence, third, there is an ontological continuum, a common ground between sentient beings and the Buddhas. In actuality all beings partake in the changeless and timeless nature of the buddha, since they equally possess buddha-nature as an ontological condition. As Duckworth, quoting Parkum and Stultz states, “we are born with Original Blessing, not Original Sin” (Parkum and Stultz, 2003: 282 in Duckworth, 2015).

Epistemologically, unlike other, theological, approaches that presume an unbridgeable ontological gap between God and the world of phenomena, in this pantheistic respect of Buddhist religion, an analogous distance between buddha and sentient being does not apply. And since the point of examination is reality itself, inferential reasoning cannot be a sufficient instrument of examination of buddha-nature; in final analysis, argumentation must be subordinated to its practical purposes, and, as phenomenologists would say, be checked by direct perception itself. This means, that the project of investigation entails an enquiry in the enquiring subject itself. Therefore, there is no duality presupposed in the relation of Buddha and the world, as there is no duality between the cognitive subject and object of cognition. Thus, the task of gnosis is a task of praxis. In the Buddhist practice, the Buddha is not an external reality to be attained, but a presently reality to be accessed

in the present moment, insofar one can perceive the buddha qualities (Duckworth, 2015). This is the aim of Buddhist Tantra or Vajrayana School of philosophy and practice.

The Tantric text Guhyagarbha (Secret Essence Tantra), signifies a historical turn in the Buddhist thought: the concept of Buddha-nature from universal potentiality for awakening, is expanded in a way that signifies the affirmation of universal awakening right now. The meaning of this transition towards immanence, which takes shape as an immanent absolute, found in all Buddhist traditions across East Asia, designates human nature as “heritage” of all sentient beings; in many cases as a quality of insentient objects as well. Divine in Buddhism is not transcendent, like in classical theism, since divinity is immanent, in each sentient being and in all things, and all together constitute an inter-connected whole. This kind of pantheism is adverse to theism known in the West to have raised in significance God as infinite, degrading simultaneously humans and other beings as finite, causing thus a dualistic ontological and evaluative split between the two (Duckworth, 2015). The view that does not see any axiological difference between beings in an ontological level, could be reflected in the socio-political formation.

### Political implications of the theory of buddha-nature

Even though buddha-nature in the Tantric tradition is considered as already present, in the relative field of the socio-historical world there are particular conditions that could be playing a role in its realisation. Unlike the anthropological hypothesis which have been examined by Sahlins, the theory of buddha-nature does not lead to, or does not presuppose, hierarchy and coercion but equality and liberation. As mentioned above, if buddha-nature can be fulfilled as awakening, this is so, exactly because it is empty; moreover, Nāgārjuna’s idea that beings and events are empty of substantial existence and own identity (svabhāva), is very important from the side of the conditions required for the Buddhist salvific project. This implies that a political task could be also associated to the soteriological content of Buddhist doctrine in the light of the meaning of emptiness, that is liberation from all possible bondage. If emptiness serves this purpose by means of freedom from conceptual thought, and from the superimpositions and limitations the latter imposes, then this aim can be seen to contain a political dimension with particular connotations. Both constrain and liberation from constrain are axiomatic, in the sense that they shape the foundational understanding of human condition. This stance places the subject in a particular position, where freedom from any external coercion is critical, and Buddhist technologies of the self essential.

In his doctorate thesis, Toby Mendelson [18] connects Nagarjūna’s philosophy with political philosophy, while he applies the traditional liberal categories of negative and positive liberties of J. S. Mill in the Buddhist soteriology. Even though in the Buddhist tradition it is clear that one is responsible for his own salvation, to the extent that soteriological and ethical transformation is dependent

on reflective intentional choice-making of the conventional subject, then ethical but also political autonomy are important and need to be reassured. This position gives prominence to negative liberty (Mendelson, 2013, 116). In this sense freedom from State should be reassured as an enhancing condition for the possibility of essential subjective transformation, either in an explicitly soteriological manner or in a more open targeted ethical manner. This condition of negative liberty refers to freedom from direct external engagement in thoughts, desires and actions, related to subjective formation, becoming; and signifies that coercive state powers cannot be justified to prevent it from occurring. Furthermore, there could be also more subtle forms of negative liberty. The soteriological and moral forms of ethical transformation presuppose, that one has the freedom from externally imposed views, so that he or she has sufficient critical rationality to think, analyse and judge or decide free from externally prescribed views of reality or values.

Positive freedom on the other hand, “freedom to”, is very important if not of greater importance, since, as Mendelson explains, “it is expressive of the basic trajectory of moving from the constrains of svabhāva to the freedoms associated with śūnyatā/pratīyasamutpāda” (Mendelson, 2013, 140). The thought over emptiness and agency lead to a comprehension of self-realization, which even though might not be conceived through the strictly Buddhist soteriological or ethical thought, will contribute to a very vivid idea of conscious and responsible praxis released from mistaken identifications. The terms for self-realization cannot be put in exclusively subjective base, because agency is constituted by a number of material and discursive-conceptual external factors (Mendelson, 2013, 137). The possibility for realizing subjective potentiality, to some extent depends on these factors which contribute to this realisation. As Foucault has shown, the technologies of the self, are socio-historically constituted. In this respect, the understanding of this self-realisation presupposes that there is space for action for subjectivity in the sense that structure is not superimposing.

The kind of political freedom which takes place in such a situation, is both negative and positive. Positive, however, means that some structures and some conditions might be conducive to self-realization by giving space to free praxis. Institutions such as the state, representation, the principle of a supposed majority deciding for all, and the ideology of economy, as many critics of liberal representative democracy - with its stratifications, totalitarian tendencies and power mechanisms-have shown [19], are most likely not conducive to the condition of self-realisation. Positive form of liberty is more essential for moving from the limitations of svabhāva to the freedoms related to śūnyatā, Mendelson explains. However, negative freedom, is also necessary for this trajectory to be fulfilled and cannot be sacrificed for the sake of positive freedom as it would happen in a Platonic or idealised regime for example (Mendelson, 2013, 140). However, neither positive freedom can be sacrificed, in the way that Mill’s liberalism had favored

negative liberty on the expense of the positive liberty, nor can the state be trusted as a guarantor for their reassurance like in Mill's utilitarianism. Although I referred to the two kinds of liberties as a methodological tool to exemplify the importance the connection of buddha-nature and freedom through the concept of emptiness, I do not endorse it for its political systemic signification, as I consider that socio-politically a unitary concept of freedom is more robust [20].

The problematic of subjective freedom and potentiality is placed in a political context. Once it is clear that the potential of the subjective transformation, is related to the role, structures and institutions play in the formation of the subjective gnosis, then the significance of self-realization is extended well beyond the confines of human agency and placed into the network of the relations of the polis itself. Then the transformation of the illusory or deluded aspects of the socially organised order, such as hierarchy, discrimination, antagonism, disciplinary controls etc. becomes a prerequisite and an imperative. Intellectually such a task is compatible with the rational and dialectical critique that the concept of *svabhāva* according to the perspective of *śūnyatā* entails, with the dynamic that may unfold in the public sphere. *Svabhāva* here may be interpreted according to the Castoriadian term of "ensemblistic-identitary Logic" [21,22], which contradicts what he calls the magmas. The magmas are compatible with the Being's multiplicity and with creation *ex nihilo* as innate principle of the Being, and correspond to otherness. Otherness is opposed to difference which is a concept correspondent to ensemblistic-identitary Logic. It is possible phenomenologically, through a constant reconfiguration of structures and questioning of institutions that an understanding of emptiness allows (Medelson, 2013, 138), in parallel with the ancient Greek and contemporary political thinkers, advocates of political autonomy, to conceive a political constitution which will include direct participation, inclusion of otherness and constant renewal of the constitution itself; an articulation of relationships where the public sphere unfolds as a space of expressing collective creativity which is boundless. For Cornelius Castoriadis, one of the most significant representatives of the project of autonomy in the twentieth century, the principle of indeterminacy plays philosophically an analogous role that emptiness plays in this text, as a foundation for simultaneous autonomy and inter-connectedness [23].

To the extent humans phenomenologically may embody the view of *śūnyatā*, they can perceive sentient beings through a stance of impartiality, whereby the clear demarcation of self and other is transcended due to the understanding of the buddha-nature and the shared immanence of the co-emergent encounter. Further, there is a view of equality in the understanding of the equal partaking in the buddha-nature as co-emergent soteriological possibility for ethical transformation and liberation (Mendelson, 2013, 181). The fact that political conditions of a libertarian approach were presently formed in relation to the buddha-nature as a condition to-be, as a becoming, does not tie down the salvific truth of the

subjectivity to social relations and political constitutions, in terms of determinacy and dependency. As a primordial ever-present luminous nature of mind, empty of itself, the buddha-nature is attained and always attainable subjective reality. But taking the principle of dependent co-origination as an argumentation in respect to buddha-nature, served methodologically, to show the libertarian and anti-hegemonic characteristics that politically this approach of buddha-nature theory may lead to. However, this is not succeeded on the base of the polarity nature/ culture but by means of immanence of the natural within the humane and the divine within the natural, as a luminous cosmological principle of awakened consciousness analysed in a way that precludes any relations of power and dominion.

## Conclusion

The Buddha-nature can be called a human nature but without being exclusively humane. It is a nature that other beings equally partake in as potentiality, but also as an ever-present and omnipresent condition of reality. Hence, it constitutes the absolute infinite principle within each being, giving shape to a pantheistic universe without hierarchical axiology. By characterising buddha-nature as empty, Buddhist philosophy does not fall within the frame of traditional essentialist or substantial thought. Because emptiness allows buddha-nature to be placed in the "plane of immanence", as Deleuze would say, in between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the world of the relative, or cyclic existence, and the world of the absolute. As a timeless ontological condition that requires, however, to be revealed, from a relative standpoint, it is dependent upon skillful means (*upāya*, *thabs*). In this context, *bodhicitta* appears to be a gnoseological and axiological method leading to buddha-nature and taking place due to it. *Bodhicitta* is simultaneously a praxis and a gnosis combined in the embodied expressivity of buddha-nature, as a becoming of liberation and as already awakened nature. And since gnosis and praxis are empty, compassion becomes a principle of connectivity which relates to otherness, in a relationship where otherness is like the self, insofar the self is selfless just like otherness. Buddha-nature is founded upon this phenomenological and ontological condition of empty nature of self and phenomena. The fact that according to the principle of dependent co-arising everything is connected to all the rest as a form of causality, places the human being in position of responsibility for the rest of the world [24], in terms of thought and praxis.

Therefore, inter-connectedness as ontological consequence of the buddha-nature and emptiness doctrine, lead to the release of the bondages that previous anthropologies of human nature constructed. If the prominent position of the Western anthropologies, which was based on the dualistic split between nature and culture, nurtured the "metaphysics of power" and encouraged the violation of nature, including indigenous peoples and other species as part of this nature, the Buddhist pantheistic perception of human nature becomes a theory for the nature of reality itself, considering it as immanent potentiality. This reality

reveals itself empty of essential qualities, hence, no dogmatic principle of “closed” or one-dimensional systematization can be ascribed to it. Also, like the Anaximandean apeiron (ἀπειρον), it is not compatible with transcendental views, that favour axiological discrimination between beings or between a superior infinite buddha and inferior finite beings. Therefore, emptiness does not justify relations of power, dominion and superimposition. Politically, the aforementioned principles correspond to egalitarian, just and cooperative schemas, and resist conformist, stratified and controlling systems and mechanisms. The reasoning of emptiness allows for a society, that is able to constantly question and reconstitute itself in autonomous ways, and will not conform with ensemblistic-identitary logic.

Finally, contrary to the political resolutions of hegemony, and subjugation of subjectivity that ‘Hobbessian’, or even more liberal theories of human nature, culminated in, by presupposing the State as a sine qua non, the theory of buddha-nature does not presuppose any such organisation and the primary responsible for one’s liberation is one’s own self. Nevertheless, if we are about to see the consequences of such a theory in the relative field of social and political relations, there would be two things to observe: firstly, that the principles of tathāgatagarbha, bodhicitta, śūnyatā, and prṭīyasamutpāda enhance the consciousness of equality, solidarity, caring and connectedness of humans with each other and with all other entities. Secondly, in the socio-political field, buddha-nature as self-liberation, points to the direction of social liberation as well. The fact that from the perspective of the relative aspect of buddha-nature, as a condition of cognitive and ethical transformation, buddhahood is something to be attained and co-emergent, in the scope of this paper only proves that the philosophico-political consequences of such a theory, can be libertarian and egalitarian; pointing to a social condition that can support the cognitive, ontological and political autonomy and freedom of subjectivities and collectives.

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