

1222·2022
800
ANNI



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche, Geografiche e dell'Antichità

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa Mediterranea

Corso di Laurea Magistrale Interateneo in
Scienze delle Religioni

Presence and Emptiness

Building soteriology between Ernesto de Martino and Nāgārjuna

Relatore:

Ch.ma Prof.ssa Emanuela Magno

Corelatore:

Ch.ma Prof.ssa Chiara Cremonesi

Laureando/a:

Francesco Maria Catanzaro

Matricola: 2004630

Presence and Emptiness

Building soteriology between Ernesto de Martino and Nāgārjuna

Francesco M. Catanzaro

ABSTRACT

Being-in-the-World, as an elementary phenomenal experience – that nonetheless can be thought and built in different ways – appears fundamentally fragile. By analyzing the works of two authors from radically different cultural, intellectual and philosophical milieux, I will try to show how some similar problems and solutions are given in front of the various forms of suffering and of the radical, ultimate crisis of existence. Elaborating the thought of the two authors focusing on their most important and philosophically dense works – Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and Ernesto de Martino's *La fine del mondo* – it will be shown how the drama of existence and the problem of the end, always exposed to impermanence, undertake different formulations and yet alike. Most importantly, I will try to highlight how both solutions pass through a new understanding of the subject, a *presence* standing on *emptiness* as its (absence of) grounding.

L'essere-nel-mondo, come esperienza fenomenologica elementare – pur nella sua possibilità di essere pensata e costruita in modi diversi – appare fondamentalmente fragile. Analizzando il pensiero di due autori di appartenenze culturali, intellettuali e filosofiche radicalmente diverse, si cercherà di mostrare come certi problemi comuni e certe soluzioni logicamente possibili si diano di fronte alle varie forme di sofferenza e alla crisi radicale e ultima dell'esistere. Elaborando il pensiero dei due autori a partire dalle loro opere più importanti e filosoficamente più dense – *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* di Nāgārjuna e *La fine del mondo* di Ernesto de Martino – si vedrà come il problema della fine e il dramma dell'esistere sempre esposti all'impermanenza, assumano risvolti diversi eppure affini. Infine, cercherò di mostrare come le forme di soluzione proposte passino entrambe attraverso una riformulazione del soggetto, che si dà come *presenza* di cui la *vacuità* è (assenza di) fondamento.

Quando un certo orizzonte sensibile entra in crisi, il rischio è infatti costituito dal franamento di ogni limite: tutto può diventare tutto, che è quanto dire: il nulla avanza.

(De Martino, MM, p. 123)

*na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy
ahetutaḥ | utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ
kva cana ke cana ||*

(Nāgārjuna, MK, I, 1)

INDEX

Introduction

- I. *Nāgārjuna*
- II. *Ernesto de Martino*
- III. *A dialogue*
- IV. *Some key terms*

1. The Problem – Radical Crisis

- 1.1. *Buddhism and dukkha*
 - 1.1.1. *Suffering in life*
- 1.2. *The crisis in Western world*
 - 1.2.1. *The end of life*
 - 1.2.2. *The end of the world*
- 1.3. *Forms of the radical crisis*
 - 1.3.1. *Poverty*
 - 1.3.2. *Ecological collapse*
 - 1.3.3. *Animal suffering*
- 1.4. *How to cope with the radical crisis?*

2. The Middle Way – Emptiness

- 2.1. *The No-Self doctrine*
 - 2.1.1. *Atman vs. Anatman*
- 2.2. *Emptiness*
 - 2.2.1. *What is “emptiness”?*
 - 2.2.2. *Can we talk about “emptiness”?*
 - 2.2.3. *What does “emptiness” imply?*
- 2.3. *The persistence of self-perception*

3. The Medium – Presence

- 3.1. *What does it mean to be in the world?*
 - 3.1.1. *The phenomenal first-person experience*

- 3.1.2. *The built nature of the non-built*
- 3.1.3. *The mythic-ritual foundation of experience*
- 3.1.4. *The endless valorization of the presence*
- 3.1.5. *The embeddedness of the presence*
- 3.1.6. *The End of the World and the Ethos*
- 3.2. *What is the presence?*
- 4. The Solution – Soteriology
 - 4.1. *Some questions*
 - 4.1.1. *How can emptiness be built?*
 - 4.1.2. *How can empty ethics be proposed?*
 - 4.1.3. *How can presence be experienced?*
 - 4.1.4. *How can dialectics and emptiness relate?*
 - 4.2. *A tentative proposal for a robust soteriology*
 - 4.2.1. *Dennett: informative patterns*
 - 4.2.2. *Žižek: posing one's own ground*
 - 4.2.3. *Westerhoff: irrealism*
 - 4.3. *Some answers*
- 5. Conclusion – How to build a soteriology

References

Introduction

This thesis is a comparison of two authors – Nāgārjuna and Ernesto de Martino – belonging to very different cultural contexts, afar in space and time as well as in their perspectives about the themes they discuss. These themes, nonetheless, also bring the two together in a common effort for a radical understanding of the human condition, its problems, and a way to overcome or live with them. The focus of this thesis, then, is not a wide, full-blown comparison between the two philosophers (which will be pointless, or not of much interest), but rather a discussion of their main ideas in the conviction that they can share light on each other. These ideas concern suffering, human presence in the world and in front of the end of the world, and possible ways to overcome this all. But why specifically these two authors?

Firstly, why Nāgārjuna? Because he takes Buddhist thought and path to the utmost, producing an interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha that will become central in all subsequent Mahāyāna, from China to Japan and Tibet. His teachings are exemplar for the way he refutes all positions, thus avoiding to cling to anything, as a form of perfect liberation. Although all Buddhism is concerned with suffering and liberation from it, Nāgārjuna is particularly direct and decisive in showing how to overcome it once for all. Moreover, his presentation of the doctrine, although genial, is not unproblematic, since (to say but one thing) it takes discourse to an ineffable point. The comparison with a scholar of religions such as Ernesto de Martino – who was aware, in his own terms, of the embedded and co-produced status of cultural products, who focused greatly on myth, ritual, and the ways humans try to protect themselves from change, non-repeatability and suffering through these devices – may serve as a useful counterbalance.

Then, why de Martino? Many other contemporary authors may fit in the role – easy to think of Derrida, for example, whose deconstructive work is very akin to that of Nāgārjuna (as noted by Mabbett 1995). De Martino is a preferential choice for some reasons, apart from the one already mentioned of critical balance with Nāgārjuna's supposed ineffability: one is simply a better knowledge of the author, whose hard prose I can read in the original language. Another is the theorization of presence which de Martino brings forth and which, I maintain, can be extremely useful to understand and dialogue with the Buddhist (and especially Nāgārjuna's) perspective on the self. Lastly, but most importantly, I deem de Martino's work extremely useful when it comes to the ethical and operative problems emerging from a discourse around emptiness, the permanence of our subjective ethical responsibility and ability to understand the world so as to act in it – whatever our presence and the world may be.

Furthermore, this work benefit from the fortunate opportunity of being followed by my supervisors, respectively an expert of Nāgārjuna and of de Martino, providing the chance of working on a comparison never done before – a comparison that I think is worth for the hermeneutic challenges and the critical understanding it can produce.

I will briefly sketch both authors' lives, their main contribution to their fields, and highlight the two works that I am going to analyze and use as main sources of this thesis. I will then proceed to discuss the issues on which I want to focus and onto which I divided the thesis: namely, the problem of the “radical crisis”; Nāgārjuna's critique and use of emptiness as

therapeutic; and the theorization of de Martino about the presence as a different way to elaborate the problem.

The process of individuating the problem, reflecting on its causes and proposing a solution is what I called “soteriology”, since the difference between the two authors is so wide that it needs an umbrella term to talk about their strategies – neither properly religious nor just philosophical – of coping with the “radical crisis”. In the concluding part, I will then try to make sense of the comparison, to see if, and to what extent, it may be possible to conjugate presence and emptiness.

Nāgārjuna

Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 CE)¹ was a Mahāyāna² monk and philosopher, considered the founder of the Madhyamaka school.³ He is held to be the most important philosopher of Buddhism and possibly the most preeminent figure for its development after the historical Buddha himself.⁴ With his complete rejection of all theses, Nāgārjuna “stands to be the master *par excellence* of the negative way in the history of thought”.⁵ He has been at the center of Buddhist philosophical reflection for almost two millennia, and, since the second half of XX century, of Anglophone scholarship as well.⁶

¹ Dating Nāgārjuna’s life is not easy, since his figure is demi-legendary, with historical and hagiographical accounts overlapping; although the debate is still ongoing, the date presented is commonly accepted. For further information, see for example Mabbett, Ian, 1998. “The problem of the historical Nagarjuna revisited”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 118(3): 332–346; Walser, Joseph, 2005. *Nāgārjuna in Context. Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press.

² Mahāyāna is the second “vehicle” (*vāda*) or doctrinal branch of Buddhism – coming after the older *Theravāda* – and today the most widespread. Its origins can be traced back around the first-second centuries CE, even if its development and recognition may be later (around the middle of first millennium CE; see for example Lamotte 1954: 392; Schopen 2000: 20ff), a point that made scholars such as Walser (2006) argue that this need for institutional recognition can explain the way Nāgārjuna elaborates and mediated his discourse in relation with other contemporary currents of thought. Recent scholarship, nonetheless, rejected some of these interpretations in favor of new ones (Drewes 2010).

³ Although this school – sometimes referred as *sūnyatāvāda* – can be said to have its founder in Nāgārjuna, it is quite obvious that he was not aware of such foundation (Berger 2021: 83). The school, anyway, revolves around the concepts of *sūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* as exposed by Nāgārjuna. For an introduction to Madhyamaka, see for example Westerhoff 2009, Arnold 2005, Seyfort Ruegg 1981.

⁴ See Westerhoff, Jan Christoph, “Nāgārjuna”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/nagarjuna/>.

⁵ Sebastian 2016: 16. Although, as every author – especially the ones dealing with such difficult, borderline enterprise such as trying to go beyond language and challenging traditional, deeply ingrained views – Nāgārjuna has also been subjected to much criticism, advocating for his logical inconsistency, use of contradictions and paradoxes, or even “sleight-of-hand tricks” (see for example R.H. Robinson, “Did Nāgārjuna Really Refute All Philosophical Views?”, *Philosophy East and West*, 22(3), 325–331, 1972; especially hard in contesting is R.P. Hayes, “Nāgārjuna: Master of Paradox, Mystic or Perpetrator of Fallacies?”, reading at the Philosophy Department at Smith College, April 2003, pp. 1-11).

⁶ Tuck (1990) presents a history of Nāgārjuna’s scholarship in the West, roughly distinguishing three phases: idealistic, analytic and post-Wittgensteinian. Berger (2011: 57-8) lists briefly some of the main hermeneutical positions taken towards Nāgārjuna, from Kantian and Hegelian ones to likening him to a proto-analytic philosopher or the later Wittgenstein, and again to Jamesian pragmatism or Derridian deconstructionism, to classic skepticism and up to the latest anti-realist and anti-essentialist ones.

Nāgārjuna is a complex author for many reasons.⁷ Given the limits of space – this being a thesis on a comparison and an attempt to solve some specific issues, particularly pressing on contemporaneity – I cannot delve too deep into them, and I have to give some things for granted. For the sake of brevity and to provide but one significative example of his philosophical complexity, I will simply show how one single verse from Nāgārjuna’s *magnum opus* has been translated, interpreted and debated upon, so as to give an idea of the problems that may arise in the difficult task of reading him.

In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXIV:18, Nāgārjuna formulates shortly – in the *sūtra* fashion – the relationship between *sūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*, usually translated, respectively, as “emptiness” and “co-dependent arising”. The verse is:

*yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ sūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe /
sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā //*

This verse has been translated in different ways, according to interpretative trends and agendas, hermeneutical orientation of the authors, etc. What follows is a list of some of the main interpretations among the English-speaking scholarship:⁸

We declare that whatever is relational origination is *sūnyatā*. It is a provisional name (i.e. thought construction) for the mutuality (of being) and, indeed, it is the middle path. (Inada 1970: 148).

We interpret the dependent arising of all things as the absence of being in them. Absence of being is a guiding, not a cognitive notion, presupposing the everyday. It is itself the middle way. (Sprung 1979: 238).

We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention. That itself is the middle path. (Kalupahana 1986: 339)

Whatever is dependently co-arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way. (Garfield 1995: 304)

Dependent Origination we declare to be emptiness. It (emptiness) is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path. (Siderits and Katsura 2013: 277).

That (“emptiness”) is a reciprocal designation (reciprocal with “conditionally co-arisen”). This is precisely the middle path. (Berger 2021: 96).

The debate over the interpretation of this verse, and of the entirety of Nāgārjuna’s work, is considerable and still ongoing,⁹ a proof of his great interest and actuality.

⁷ Just to list some of the main issues that Nāgārjuna’s work raises: the meaning of “emptiness”, that will be discussed in this thesis; the use of the *catuskoṭi* (four-cornered logic) and the related refusal of every position about reality; the statement that he himself holds no thesis; problems about ineffability and logical consistency; the status of the “two truths”.

⁸ Each translation-interpretation is an important contribution and it helps comparing them, although none is immune to criticism. For example, Sprung’s excerpt has the advantage of being more expositional, but it has been criticized by de Jong (De Jong, J. W. 1981, “Review of Mervyn Sprung, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way*”, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 23: 227-230) who maintained that Sprung’s level of Sanskrit was not adequate to translate the *Prasannapadā*. Berger (2021) goes further, arguing that all the previous translations are essentially mistaken, but his rendering remains quite cryptic and not as readable as others.

⁹ An amusing example: Berger’s article “Acquiring Emptiness: Interpreting Nāgārjuna’s MMK 24:18” (2010) was criticized by J. L. Garfield and J. Westerhoff in the short reply “Acquiring the Notion of a Dependent

Ernesto de Martino

Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965)¹⁰ was “one of the greatest Italian thinkers of the twentieth century”¹¹, an eclectic scholar, prominent in the Italian academic panorama – at the point that, after his death, “for around fifteen years, half of the books published in Italy about ethnology and history of religion were influenced by de Martino”.¹² Hard to classify for his many interests – including philosophy, visual and symbolic anthropology, history of religions, ethnopsychiatry, parapsychology, musicology, folklore studies¹³ –, de Martino was able to keep them all together through his personal commitment for the marginalized ones and an attention to the forms of human experience of the crisis.¹⁴ These diversified interests may have contributed to his lack of wider recognition and his exclusion from the most relevant developments of academic life. He is still an important author in the contemporary Italian debate about religion, but not well known nor relevant for the broader, international academic community.¹⁵ In spite of this, it has been pointed out how

[t]he field of anthropology has thus moved in de Martino’s direction and it may well be that nearly a half century after his death we are in a better position to understand what he was saying. (Farnetti, Stewart 2012, p. 432)

Some of the topics and tools of his research, it must be admitted, have somehow been developed and amplified by others, more prominent authors¹⁶, or simply do not fit the agendas of contemporary scholarship anymore, or may have grown obsolete and critically inaccurate.¹⁷

Designation: A Response to Douglas L. Berger” (2011), to which Berger rebutted in the same year, coming back to the issue and elaborating it further, ten years later, in *Indian and Intercultural Philosophy. Personhood, Consciousness, and Causality*, pp. 56-100.

¹⁰ For biographical and intellectual introductions to de Martino, see for example Angelini 2008; Charuty 2009 (available in French and Italian); Ferrari 2012. For the most recent and comprehensive analysis of de Martino’s work available in English, see Geisshuesler 2021.

¹¹ Ferrari 2012: viii.

¹² Angelini 2008: 10.

¹³ See Della Costa 2015: 7; Angelini 2008.

¹⁴ His first important work, *Il mondo magico* (1948) – badly translated in English with the unfortunate title *Primitive Magic: the Psychic Powers of Shamans and Sorcerers* – discusses the problem of the “crisis of the presence” in shamanic cultures, concluding that the analyzed cultural groups (drawing from second-hand ethnographic sources) were still in a situation of perpetual risk of loss of the presence due to the lack of a strong sense of self. In time, de Martino will have the chance to apply this intuition to first-hand ethnographic researches in the South of Italy, changing his perspective to the point of proposing, in his last and posthumous work, that not only “pre-civilized cultures” face this radical risk, but even Westerners: the risk of losing the presence is the radical risk mankind faces.

¹⁵ For a review of de Martino’s reception in European scholarship, see Gallini & Massenzio 1997; Ferrari 2012. For attempts to bring de Martino’s work to a wider audience, see for example Pandolfi 1992; Saunders 1993, 1995; Massenzio 2005; Berrocal 2009; Geisshuesler 2021.

¹⁶ Echoes or similarities with his work can be found in much of French scholarship – from Lévi-Strauss’ work on the myth (e.g. 1978) and his interest in the “ethnographic other” (Lanternari 1990: 588), to Foucault’s analysis of the relationship between power and bodies, especially in *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961), as well as in Bourdieu’s discussion of the “habitus” (1977) or his reflection on the “mystic”, “symbolic” and the charismatic (1991), and particularly in Derrida, for example in *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (2003) on the problem of death, the end, and their valorization, as well as the whole problem of historicity and the permanence of value in his discussion of Husserl’s phenomenology (1962).

¹⁷ Much has been said, for example, about de Martino early interest and commitment in parapsychology – a research field that, although often overlooked or dismissed, is worthy of investigation and still ongoing: see for example *The Parapsychological Association* (URL: <<https://www.parapsych.org/>>), the *Society for Psychical Research* (URL: <<https://www.spr.ac.uk/home/>>), as well as Edinburgh University’s *Koestler Parapsychology*

Still, there is more than a thing that needs not to be overlooked in de Martino's works: namely, the idea of myth (and its correlate, the ritual) as a protective device against the passing of things; the uniqueness of experience and its need of intersubjective valorization; and the elaboration of presence as a relational, continually rebuilt functional fiction.

A dialogue

The central points of this thesis are two: the “radical crisis” as a problem, *emptiness* and *presence* as attempted solutions. The problem of the crisis is declined, inside the Buddhist doctrine, as *dukkha*, the truth of suffering; for de Martino and for certain contemporary forms of Western thought, this crisis is represented by a certain disruption of human (self-)understanding and being-in-the-world.

Strictly related to this crisis, then, is the *presence*, that the Buddhism doctrine elaborates as *anattā*, conventionally understood as lack of self-nature, the pivotal point around which *dukkha* revolves (Nāgārjuna, however, will elaborate further on this point, which is not a mere negation); de Martino, drawing from some intuitions of Western philosophy, will understand it as the being-in-the-world of individuals whose status is no more the stable, fixed “modern subject” (if ever there was such a thing), but instead a fragile, fluid and perpetually rebuilt one.

By discussing the two authors I will therefore try to show how their attempt to build a soteriology that holds against the radical crisis is to radically re-elaborate the *presence* through a deconstruction of it (which implies, at the same time, a reconstruction). Subjectivity, as well as the whole reality, comes to be seen differently, as empty – relational, co-produced – thus implying a shift in our very experience and a possibility of transcending the radical crisis.

Some key terms

Attempting a comparison in English between, on the one hand, a second-century Buddhist philosopher who wrote in Sanskrit and, on the other hand, a hard-reading Italian continental eclectic philosopher from the previous century, is not an easy task. Here are some of the main terms used in this thesis (that will be explained further along the work) with their main meaning. The terms occur in their whole work, but are taken mostly from their main ones, namely the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (from now on MK) and *La fine del mondo* (by now FM).

1. In Ernesto De Martino

Translating de Martino is a “challenging task” (Zinn 2015) which presents at least two major problems, namely, the need to stick to de Martino's own method and the difficulty of conveying his “erudite, poetic” and overall “cryptic” prose (Ferrari 2012: ix). In the following work I will mostly rely on the best available introductory text in English, the already quoted *Ernesto de Martino on Religion. The Crisis and the Presence*, so as to keep possible future

Unit (URL: <<https://koestlerunit.wordpress.com>>). For a more critical and various but still related work, see for example Cardeña and Winkelmann's (2011) *Altering consciousness: Multidisciplinary perspectives: History, culture, and the humanities*, Santa Barbara: Praeger.

translations on a common standard. I will nonetheless propose slightly different translations, or more than a single reading in note, whenever I deem it necessary.

- Presence (*presenza*) – “cultural behavior realistically effective, detachment from the natural condition by means of work having human value” (FM: 433)
A key term in de Martino’s whole body of work, and most important in this thesis. The term is used by de Martino in a variety of nuances, being modified and re-worked in time following his own intellectual trajectory and experience. Presence may be understood as a relational Being-in-the-World.
- Crisis of the presence (*crisi della presenza*) – the impossibility of making value and, thus, of thinking of a world to come. This experience can lead to psychopathological or cultural apocalypses, since there cannot be any more projectable world (for the individual in the first case, for a whole society in the second) in which to build operativity.
- Value (*valore*) – “The distancing from mere naturality as culture” (FM: 430). The encoding and embedding of specific experiences into the wider cultural milieu, by making them significant through the passage from private to shared. [Although *valore* can be translated as “meaning” (Ferrari 2012), I believe that *value* (in a thick sense) is more adherent to the original term]
- Transcendental Ethos of transcendence (*ethos trascendentale della trascendenza*) – the compelling ethics of valorization, the most basic need so as to make the world possible and history unfold by overcoming the actual moment into value.

2. In Nāgārjuna

For the translation of Nāgārjuna’s main work I will mostly rely on Siderits & Katsura (2013), given it is one of the most recent and best translations (MacDonald 2015). As for the interpretation, I will follow hints, parts, or full interpretations given in the various translations consulted here (De La Vallée Poussin 1903; Inada 1970; De Jong 1977; Gnoli 1979; Garfield 1995; Bugault 2002; Meli & Magno 2004; Kalupahana 2006; Magno 2012; Siderits & Katsura 2013).

- Four-cornered logic operator (*catuṣkoṭi*) – an ancient Indian understanding of logic, accepted by Nāgārjuna, which allows for four different logical positions: A , $\neg A$, $A \wedge \neg A$, $\neg A \wedge \neg(\neg A)$, or, in other terms, a position, its negation, their conjunction, the rejection of both. Nāgārjuna will refuse all four of them.
- Emptiness (*sūnyatā*) – a debated term that is here intended as a means deployed by Nāgārjuna to reject every position, by showing how no thesis holds, being absurd, and how every conceptualisation is to be abandoned. This also implies the co-dependence of everything.

- Co-dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) – the dependence of every phenomena upon another, none of them being substantial. This idea is entailed by emptiness.
- Two truths (*dva satye*) – the debated distinction between the conventional understanding of reality and the ultimate one, which nonetheless collapse and are shown as one.

I. The problem – Radical crisis

Both the Western philosophical and theological tradition of thought, as well as the Buddhist one, identify some ultimate or radical negativity inherent to human life. This problem, which for heuristic and hermeneutic reasons I will call “radical crisis”¹⁸, differs widely in its cultural and historical roots, in the way it is conceived, in its formulations and the subsequent perspectives and theoretical-practical results it produces. In the present thesis, I will take a different approach toward this radical crisis: whereas for Buddhism it may be commendable to focus on the wider tradition instead that solely on Nāgārjuna, for Western thought things work differently. Since “Western thought” is a too general and extremely differentiated cultural milieu, I cannot simply identify a common tendency; I will thus refer to Ernesto de Martino’s reading of the crisis in relation to being-in-the-world, which I maintain is broad enough in its roots and formulation to encompass the idea of crisis in Western thought.

I.1. Buddhism and dukkha

Buddhism starts and concerns itself with *dukkha*¹⁹ and its overcoming. The expression of this concern are the Four Noble Truths, being the truth of *dukkha*, of its origin, its possible cessation, and the path to overcome it. This path, the Noble Eightfold Path, is the focus of Buddhist practice. But what is *dukkha*, and why does it have to be overcome? Finnigan (2018: 168) summarizes the Buddha’s insight by saying that *dukkha*

arises from a tension between:

1. A deep-seated desire (*trṣṇā*) for, attachment (*rāga*) to, and belief in the persistence of oneself and what one owns and loves, and
2. The fact that everything is causally conditioned (*pratīyasamutpāda*) and thus impermanent (*anitya*).

Given its context-specific construction and its lack of semantic adherence to concepts employed in English and, in general, in the Western tradition of thought, I will follow a certain scholarship in keeping the term *dukkha* untranslated (Teasdale & Chaskalson 2011: 90). This term includes what we may indicate in a variety of ways:

pain, suffering, disappointment, frustration, things going badly, hassle, unease, anxiety, stress, disease, unsatisfactoriness, non-reliability of people and things, limitation, imperfection. It sums up the problematic aspects of life: its mental and physical pains, obvious or subtle, and also the painful, stressful, unsatisfactory aspects of life that engender these. (Harvey 2013: 26)

¹⁸ For a reference to the relationship between a general use of “crisis” and *dukkha*, see Emanuela Magno, “Crisi. L’altro nome del dolore (*duḥkha*). Riflessioni sull’attualità della via buddhista alla salvezza”, (2007), *Unione Buddhista Italiana – Dialogo Interreligioso*, accessed on 23/06/2022. URL: <<https://unionebuddhistaitaliana.it/dialogo-interreligioso/crisi-laltro-nome-del-dolore-du%e1%b8%a5kha/>>.

¹⁹ Although sticking to sanskrit for all other terms, I will use the pāli word here instead of the sanskrit *duḥkha* for simplicity and readability reasons, following other authors (e.g. Garfield 2015).

So, the expression encompasses different levels. The first and more evident is that of everyday physical and psychological suffering, but it is important to exemplify it, to see how wide and possibly overseen is the range of *dukkha* in our daily life:

We endure headaches, illnesses, the boredom of airport terminals, fatigue at the end of a long day, hunger, thirst, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, the anxiety of the dentist's waiting room, the awareness of our own mortality, the terror of imminent death. (Garfield 2015: 7)

On a more broad level, there is *dukkha* in the form of impermanence, of the endless change that takes everything away: aging, losing beloved ones, or, on an apparently less dramatic note, the fact that the best food, drink or any other pleasure does not last long, that we grow tired of things and their experience and memory fade away.²⁰

Lastly, there is the interdependent and relational nature of things – things which are thus out of direct control. Again, it is better to show how very human this discourse is, instead of an abstract and apparently “pessimistic” one, and how much it relates to everyone's experience:

Our well-being, security and success depend not only upon our own efforts, but upon our genetics, the weather, earthquakes, the presence of disease, the decisions of political leaders or university administrators, just plain luck, other drivers on the road, the skills of the pilot who flies the plane, the judgment of a doctor or the kindness of strangers (*Ibid*: 8).

Dukkha is not *into* existence: it *is* existence (Magno 2002: 350). *Dukkha* is, then, “the fundamental structure of our lives” and, thus, “[t]o be human is to live in *dukkha*” (Garfield 2015: 9). But is it so? Is the perspective of Buddhism reasonable, even out of a context of “belief” and acceptance of the doctrine? For sure,

[t]he majority of the world's citizens might not agree with [the Buddha's] psychological analysis of the human condition but it might nevertheless be verified by accepted epistemic means, such as empirical observation, inductive and analogical reasoning, and/or reliable testimony (Finnigan 2018: 168).

In fact, there may be ways, before the mere philosophical speculation and theorization, to show how *dukkha* is embedded into our cognition. By adding to our discourse the neuroscientific approach, findings relative to the self, cognition and the overall human functioning, it can be argued that

the essence of suffering lies in the fact that a conscious system is forced to identify with a state of negative valence and is unable to break this identification or to detach itself functionally from the representational content in question [...] What it cannot distance itself from is an internal representation of loss of control and functional coherence, a situation of rising uncertainty. (Metzinger 2016: 246)

This identification with what Metzinger (2003; 2008), in a neuroscientific fashion, calls “the

²⁰ These consequences of time and change have not gone unnoticed, of course, by non-Buddhists. The *locus classicus* of reflection about change and the suffering coming from it is poetry – as expressed famously, in Western literature, by Shakespeare's sonnets, to mention but one example.

self illusion” – something that others outside Buddhism pointed out as well (see for example Hood 2012) – is therefore what causes *dukkha*.

Thus, the fact of being so attached to the internal representation (which is identified with the self, the person’s perceptual center) and experiencing a contradiction between appropriation and its frustration can be seen as the essence of suffering. Letting go of this fundamental grasping is tantamount to letting go of *dukkha*. What one is trying to appropriate, in a sense, even if apparently counterintuitive, is *dukkha* itself, and the solution to *dukkha* is, in a sense, stopping to grasp *dukkha*.

I will therefore take the above definition as the minimum analytical definition of the radical crisis, so as to apply it to non-buddhist contexts as well.

I.1.1. *Suffering in life*

Dukkha, as we have seen, encompasses a multiform range of experiences that we may count as negative. Buddhist doctrine talks about twelve links of dependent origination, heuristically distinguished but essentially interrelated forms of our suffering. In this sense, we cannot say that ignorance is the main or only source of *dukkha*, nor any of the other links of the chain. Harvey (2013: 66) lists them as following:

- (1) spiritual ignorance → (2) constructing activities → (3) (discriminative) consciousness → (4) mind-and-body/ the sentient body → (5) the six sense-bases → (6) sensory stimulation → (7) feeling → (8) craving → (9) grasping → (10) becoming → (11) birth → (12) ageing, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, unhappiness and distress.

Everything is co-produced, since no thing is in itself. Nonetheless, we can see how, from birth to death (since the list can be explained from 1 to 12, as well as starting from 12 with birth as its origin), passing from various degrees like consciousness and sensation, the radical crisis unfolds continuously.

Since existence is understood as such, in Buddhism there is an ethical concern about giving birth. Is it acceptable to make someone come to life, since this world is pervaded with *dukkha*? At the same time, without birth there will be no liberation, no path – no suffering, sure, because there will be nothing: but the state of “nothingness” is also an extreme that Buddhism wants to overcome. Life and its events, although entrenched in *dukkha*, are necessary, and the so-called “conventional level” of reality is recognized as important in Buddhism. As portrayed in the poems of a Tibetan author, Dge-‘dun-chos-‘phel:

If sex were abandoned in the realm of humans, / It would surely become empty in an instant.
And if there were no human beings, / How could there be monks and the Buddha’s teachings?
(Chopel 2018: 16, v. 70)

This is when de Martino comes to our aid again: the radical crisis, in fact, also implies the end of every possible world. Birth, procreation, life and death – the continuation of history and value – are thus something that must be brought on in spite of, and in relation with, its intrinsic *dukkha*. This is also a point which may help to illustrate a problem that we will have to face when discussing Nāgārjuna: once one realizes emptiness, there cannot be any path, any doctrine, any Buddha, anything; but it is at the same time necessary to walk the path,

follow the doctrine of the Buddha, and experience things – in fact, it is only through this that one can overcome it.

I.2. The crisis in the Western world

Although the question of suffering is not unknown to the Western philosophical and religious tradition, it does not significantly impact Western thought as pervasively and analytically as in Buddhism. Instead, I maintain that the idea of *crisis* is a quite common topic in the Western tradition of thought: from the omnipresent, centuries-old apocalyptic fear (Collins 2014; Lehner 2021) to the more modern spread of a “literature of crisis” – which, *en passant*, may very well be related to the crisis of the modern model of individual, strongly conceived as an independent subject in relationship to a reified, objectified world (Farinelli 2009).

Some early and celebrated examples can be seen in works like Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*²¹, Guenon’s *The Crisis of the Modern World*²², Freud’s *The Uneasiness of Civilization*²³, Husserl’s *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*²⁴ – up to contemporary authors such as John W. Burrow’s *The Crisis of Reason*, David Marquand’s *The end of the West: the once and future Europe* and, on a different take, even Slavoj Žižek²⁵.

All the aforementioned, in fact, point out in different ways (from more historical, esoterical, psychoanalytical, philosophical or cross-cultural standpoints) the discrepancies and troubles hidden into the very Western identity, forged into essentialism and later developing into cultural exceptionalism. Such “critical ethnocentric model” appears as always in need to reinforce the Western paradigm (Meighoo 2016), in a sense highlighting how the very unique and peculiar identity the West imagined for itself is essentially fragile and needs to keep being restated (historically through colonization and cultural appropriation).

De Martino refers in a similar way to the West, as the *locus* of “tradition” (FM: 262), not in the sense of Traditionalism *à la* Guenon or Evola, but rather as the very possibility of history, of our contextual historical condition which enables the *presence* through the continuous valorization of experience. This experience – the collective sum of each subjective experience which becomes transposed into intersubjective value and, thus, “remains” somehow across all changes, something that remains but is nonetheless subjected to necessary change – is what “tradition” designates for de Martino.

In this perspective, what the West produced as value is important for de Martino in the context in which he writes. Nonetheless, it can be easily seen how such tradition is in no way binding nor definitive: its importance is mostly due to the self-reflective position that it got and that in the contemporary Western world implies a self-critical stance. Such a stance is evident in the aforementioned works. De Martino’s *La fine del mondo* is to be placed among this crisis literature, too; but, at the same time, it has a peculiar place in it.

²¹ *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, in two volumes, 1918 and 1922.

²² *La crise du monde moderne*, 1927.

²³ *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1930.

²⁴ *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, unfinished, 1936.

²⁵ See for example *Living in the End of Times* (2011); with Boris Gunjevic, *God in Pain: Inversion of Apocalypse* (2012); and *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of the World to the End of Capitalism* (2015).

In this seven-hundred page posthumous work, de Martino draws on a number of fields, addressing different topics and elaborating previous ideas. Here, he discusses the concept of the apocalypse as a “symbolic device developed to resolve both the crisis and the risk of the crisis that a person or a society is inevitably subject to” (Ferrari 2012: 25).

Moreover, in FM de Martino analyzes different cultural apocalypses and crises in the world, from the Christian *eschaton* (232–279) to the “third world” (79–89) and prophetism (292–322), from crisis in contemporary literature and philosophy (323–382) to Marxist perspectives (384–417). What emerges is a shared and omnipresent crisis incumbent on human existence, thus cross-cultural and only taking specific shape in relation to different contexts, but essentially related to the presence, our being-in-the-world. With a bold move, then, it can be said that the presence, in fact, is the source and the center of the crisis – much like in Buddhism the belief in a self, which relates to experiences as appropriator, is the source of *dukkha*. At the same time, as in Buddhism the self is not the direct cause of *dukkha* (being co-produced as everything), so the presence is not simply reduced or essentialized, as I will show – thus making the parallel between Buddhism and de Martino’s elaboration useful.

Nonetheless, while I connect Buddhism and *dukkha* to a more generalized existential suffering, I will keep maintaining that the Western tradition of thought had focused more on crisis and, in this sense, death and the end of things in a more “grandiose” scale: namely, on the end of the world. De Martino exemplifies this perfectly with his apocalyptic concerns. These are not unrelated to Buddhism and its soteriological path, but the parallel has to be elaborated. Radical crisis in de Martino is about the fact of “not being there anymore”, not existing in any possible world, not being able to think of one’s presence – thus of the angst and fear this causes. Arguably, every form of suffering may be related to such an ultimate fear, as an integral part of human life: evolution and adaptation may very well show how pain is possibly related to attachment to life, and thus even the smallest scratch, with its dull pain, may remind us of our mortal destiny.

Death, whether considered into a “linear”, unique existence or a “cyclic” one subject to rebirth, is a fundamental feature of religious and philosophical systems, something that structures and signifies our symbolic relationship with others and the world. Its importance cannot be underestimated. At the same time, it is just a possible form of the radical crisis, and since many different perspectives have been given about it, I will just discuss it cursorily. After talking briefly about death, I will expand on the topic of the end of the world as the culmination of this radical crisis.

1.2.1. *The end of life*

Death puts our life in perspective. In the Indian mythological tradition, *devas* (gods) are endowed with extremely long – but not eternal – lives, but this being immersed in almost-eternal pleasures makes them uninterested in liberation. Immortality will likely make us forgetful: as Borges exemplarily portrayed in his story *The Immortal*, the ones who are such become mindless, at the point that “in their self-absorption, they scarcely [perceive] the physical world” – and yet, “[t]here is nothing very remarkable about being immortal; with the exception of mankind, all creatures are immortal, for they know nothing of death. What is divine, terrible and incomprehensible is *to know oneself immortal*” (Borges 2000: 13).

The idea of living “as if” we were immortals (which, beside metaphysics and mythology, including futuristic techno-immortality, generally amounts to the best we can do or think of for ourselves) is also perilous. Seneca pointed this out in his *De Brevitate Vitae* (III, 4) saying that this idea of perpetual life is an obstacle for living in the present, enjoying the time, since we can postpone everything indefinitely.

But, independently from the understanding of life as linear and unique or cyclic and recursive, one should try to overcome the radical crisis, as exemplified by Buddha’s parable of the arrow.²⁶ In between line and circle, it can also be pointed out that the death of beloved ones (and, stretching the image, of everything we are attached to) is each time a unique, dramatic “end of the world”, thus making linear and repetitive experience overlap (Derrida 2003). In any case, we must try to solve this conundrum that ensnares our existence.

Death, for de Martino, is the end of the valorisation, the breaking of the intersubjective bonds that give sense to existence and enact history (FM: 147-8). To quote from his last interview:

It seems to me that all the cultural values bear this aspiration, to defeat death. Man tries to overcome the human condition by means of that acquired construction that is called culture. Man as a natural being dies, but as a cultural being tries to build things that go beyond individual life.²⁷

These “things” that man builds are not simply material: Buddhist soteriology, in this sense, may be understood as something we build to face the radical crisis, as I will discuss in the concluding part of this work.

What de Martino intends when talking about death and the radical crisis is once again related to the radical crisis and to the valorization of this crisis: the possibility of maintaining something through the passing of things, and therefore to be present and enable the presence of others. To be present, as I will discuss in detail further, means to be into a semantic network that produces cultural values and allows operativity. Death not only ends the individual presence, but risks to cut the ties of the network, thus disrupting all the relational operativity. Culture, for de Martino, is to limit this disruptive effect, so as to keep making history. Religions and mythical narratives are the main means to counter this effect; in particular, for de Martino, Christianity does this by acting as a “great funerary rite” (FM: 259). Differently from other kinds of religious narratives (such as ancient Hebrew religion²⁸), Christianity re-valorises death to avoid the disruption of intersubjective values that give structure to society and history (*Ivi*: 148).

Buddhism is not discussed by de Martino, but it may very well seem that the whole enterprise of the Buddhist path is actually to overcome the radical crisis, not just limiting it: as radically as the problem goes, so does the therapy. Buddhism aims to resolve the problem at its origins. This solution, nonetheless, can be read through the lens of the cultural analysis of de Martino, and being seen as yet another (inevitable) mythological and ritual account: something that, I

²⁶ *Cūḷamālukya Sutta*, Middle Discourse 63.

²⁷ De Martino 1965: 83; my translation.

²⁸ For a discussion of the problem see, for example, Peri 2003, spec. p. 51. Following the redaction of the Biblical texts, and the development of shared ideas inside of the ancient Hebrew world, some passages of the Bible still bear the evidence of this “separation” of the dead from the living: Sal 6,5; 88,5-6; Gb 7,9.

will argue, is not detrimental not contradictory with Buddhism, especially not with what Nāgārjuna has to say.

1.2.2. *The end of the world*

The radical crisis, proposed as a continuous struggle for the appropriation of a presence always dismantled by impermanence and co-dependent arising, can (and in fact has to) be related to what goes beyond the boundaries of personal self: it is clear that not only we “age and die”, but also

[m]ountains are raised by tectonic forces. They wear away, and their rocks become topsoil in the flood plains of rivers. Stars are assembled from interstellar dust, give rise to planets that orbit them for billions of years, supernova, cool and collapse into black holes. Universes evolve, and perhaps collapse into themselves (Garfield 2015: 42).

Everything comes and goes; everything is impermanent because everything is co-dependent. Presence constitutes itself as a relational construct. Thus, it is only natural that its loss may cause a feeling of universal loss, and vice versa. This is what de Martino, following the phenomenological current in psychiatry of his time,²⁹ calls the *Weltuntergängerlebnis*, the pathological “experience of the end of the world” that connects one’s radical crisis of the presence with the loss of presence of everything – of all the things that make one’s presence possible. When the radical crisis causes the identification with the self-construct to become extremely dissociated with the “world”, with what relates to it, then all the world seems to fall apart. This state, particularly evident in schizophrenia, induced de Martino to raise the question of the striking similarity of such an apocalyptic experience in schizophrenics and religious narratives. His conclusions – that I will discuss further on – relate this dramatic experience of depersonalization and derealization, possible even in non-pathologic subjects, to what we have called the radical crisis. This immediate but contradictory identification with our self-experience and the apparent impossibility to escape from it is the intrinsic crisis of life – therefore, after stating that existence is *dukkha*, no surprise if the whole world we experience crumbles, too.

On the other hand, the end of the world, the apocalyptic fear, is maybe something that “can comfortably absorb the personal fear of death. And not just death, either, but every other ancillary fear, too—of change, of instability, of the unknown, and of the precariousness of life itself, all positions held within it” (O’Connell 2020: 240).

This idea is not new to Buddhism, which in fact knows this extreme of “nothingness” as opposed to the desire to live: both extremes are to be overcome by the middle path of emptiness. As O’Connell notes, this annihilation ideal is not even scary whereas it can remove fear, ignorance and change, the very elements that contribute to make life entrenched with *dukkha* and that nonetheless, as Buddhist doctrine show, cannot be defeated just with the end of things; and, as de Martino would add, the end of every possible valorization is the real apocalypse, and to overcome the radical crisis one has first of all to overcome the very

²⁹ FM: 91. See for example A. Wetzel, 1922, “Das Weltuntergängerlebnis in der Schizophrenie”, *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie*, 78(1): 403–28 (FM: 116); A. Storch and C. Kulenkampff, 1950, “Zum Verständnis des Weltuntergangs bei den Schizophrenen”, *Der Nervenarzt*, 21: 102–8 (FM: 115).

thought of the impossibility of a world. The moment one understands and chooses to keep valorizing experience, one has overcome the incoming end of the world. The end of the world, in fact, is much more a mental state than an actual end, or at least so it has been for all humanity up to now. So, to the question “Should we just ignore the end of the world?” (O’Connell 2020: 6), de Martino’s answer would be a clear “no”, while for Buddhism it may be more complicated.

I.3 The radical crisis

Talking about some key issues related to the “end of the world”, personal and intersubjective (such as ecological collapse, global poverty, disparities, and discrimination), will serve to the double purpose of showing how radical and wide *dukkha* is extended and how this is related to presence and emptiness: all these problems, in fact, can be seen as co-produced and centered in the self-absorbed drive that engenders the radical crisis. All the issues that I will present are connected to the radical crisis, and in turn they amplify the risk of loss of presence.

Discrimination, poverty, ecological collapse, animal pain: these are some forms of suffering and expression of radical crisis. On an apparently more “practical” level, the radical crisis is made evident by being in the world in a way that is not making it worth (madness and alienation seen and described by de Martino in his ethnographic studies in the Italian South). Such crisis, moreover, is correlative to the radical risk of the presence: in fact, if some people experience suffering at the level of feeling life not worth living (for example considering or attempting suicide) or struggling with keep going on in desperate ways, this only means a widening of suffering and clinging to ignorance for Buddhism, whereas for de Martino this implies that these people are not able to “make world”, to produce value – thus presence, in its relational process and project, slips further. These forms of suffering, personal and shared, imply what de Martino calls psychopathological and cultural apocalypses - the first being the apocalypse experienced by those (most notably suffering from personality disorders, such as schizophrenia) perceive the crisis of their being-in-the-world as a crumbling of the world itself (for example, they may see or feel the start falling, the sky darkening, and so on). The second one is the crisis of a whole culture when it becomes unable to keep producing cultural value. The end of the world, intended as a device and category to understand certain conditions of crisis, can be applied to the suffering derived from these points.

Following the minimum analytic criteria to define the radical crisis, in any case we see an identification with a subjectivity which perceives itself as not in control (either because experiencing the contradictions of its condition, facing various forms of suffering, or because such contradictions and tension bring to a crisis of this self-model).

About disparity, including the economic power differential as well as the difference in treatment under the point of view of human rights, much can be said. First of all, a remark on the possible roots and implication of the problem: being shaped by evolution as a cooperative species (Tomasello 2000; 2008; 2016; 2020), we seem to have a predisposition towards equality and apply a sort of distributive justice (Tomasello 2016: 115–118), and whenever this value is not respected we are affected by this. Thus, poverty has to be considered in relation to its environment, since a poor person in a wealthy society is faring differently from a poor

person in a less affluent one. Disparity is also shown in the treatment of “para-humanity” (Cheng 2019), that is, of all those groups or individuals somehow not fitting into certain patterns – for sexual orientation, ethnic, religious, political reasons, and more.

Disparity is stronger between North and South of the world (Santos 2015) and, in different ways, East and West (Van Norden 2017), both coinciding or overlapping with imperialism and colonial rule over oppressed regions, passing through certain epistemologies and worldviews that are hidden and made myth (Mignolo 2011). Such socio-cultural strategies, long criticized, but still working and alive, operate on “monotheistic”, singular instead of pluralistic (Bauman & Obirek 2016) understandings:

the belief in one sustainable system of knowledge, [...] is pernicious to the well-being of the human species and to the life of the planet. Such a system of knowledge, referred to here as the “Western code,” serves not all humanity, but only a small portion of it that benefits from the belief that in terms of epistemology there is only one game in town (Mignolo 2011: xii).

In particular the difference between East and West, most poignant for this thesis, is problematic on different levels. After Said’s *Orientalism* and its various critical continuators, it is important to highlight how also the “meeting” with the East, even in its most innocent or critical proposals, can fall prey of an implicit form of power differential – such as being amazed by the other in ways that just show the superiority of the Western point of view, or vice versa rejecting one’s cultural belonging by relativizing everything and assessing the “other’s” superiority (Squarcini 2007).

Given that, as said, *dukkha* is intrinsic to existence and all-pervasive, it will be pointless to try to make a comprehensive list; nonetheless, to give an idea of the extent of *dukkha* and its relationship to the end of the world, I will provide some major examples related to today’s concerns in what follows. The distinction between them is, as it will appear, never too sharp, all being interrelated and mutually influenced.

1.3.2. *Poverty*

Poverty is, to be sure, one of the greatest problems mankind has to face, and is in fact the first point of the 2030 UN Agenda.³⁰ A far-reaching problem, poverty is closely linked to lack of education (Huston 1991), racism (Case & Deaton 2020) and gender gap, with the subsequent feminization of poverty (Goldberg 2011). Poverty may engender, and is strongly related to, various mental health issues (Mani et al. 2013). In addition to education, health, and gender differences, poverty relates to environmental issues (Rayner & Malone 2001; Jafino et al. 2020). The various advancement in fighting it have been seen by some critics as deceiving and crafted for political use (Pogge 2010) – at the point of endorsing the death of millions of people in the rush for increasing the income – knowing that this amounts to a serious moral issue, since redistribution of wealth is available, but shunned. In fact, the richest 1% of the world is getting farther from the remaining 99% (with 660 new billionaires, one every 17

³⁰ United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Accessed 26/05/2022, <sustainabledevelopment.un.org>.

minutes, only in 2021), their total wealth being around US\$13.1 trillion worth,³¹ enough to end world poverty.³² Data about this increasing disparity abounds, and even if it is not easy to collect, nor always precise, it is enough to see how this is engendering every day countless suffering for many:

poverty continues unabated, as the official statistics amply confirm: 1,020 million human beings are chronically undernourished, 884 million lack access to safe water, and 2,500 million lack access to basic sanitation; 2,000 million lack access to essential drugs; 924 million lack adequate shelter and 1,600 million lack electricity; 774 million adults are illiterate; and 218 million children are child laborers. Roughly one third of all human deaths, 18 million annually, are due to poverty-related causes, easily preventable through better nutrition, safe drinking water, cheap rehydration packs, vaccines, antibiotics, and other medicines. People of color, females, and the very young are heavily overrepresented among the global poor, and hence also among those suffering the staggering effects of severe poverty. Children under the age of 5 account for over half, or 9.2 million, of the annual death toll from poverty-related causes. The overrepresentation of females is clearly documented. (Pogge 2010: 11–12).³³

Wealth disparity is also linked to politics: distribution of wealth and other measures in order to solve poverty are harder to implement in some countries due to corruption, war, and organizational issues, and even the ones adhering and supposedly willing to contribute appear to be idle or are even denounced for working against such projects (*Ibid*). The risk of political corruption or supra-national power due to the interest of the few rich is also pernicious (Piketty 2014) and democracy is already seen at risk (Gilens & Page 2014), especially given the fact that around half of the wealth of the world is concentrated in the hands of 1% of the world.³⁴

On a final note, the disparity between poor and rich is by many reconducted to a capitalist economy and pervasive mindset, which has consequences on people (Case & Deaton 2020)

³¹ See Forbes 2021, *World's Billionaires List: The Richest in 2021*, accessed 30/03/2022, <<https://www.forbes.com/billionaires>>. But the data presented in the article is not updated, showing for example Bezos being richer than Musk with respectively \$177 and \$151 billion, whereas the “Real-Time Billionaires List” shows Musk heading with 291.2 billion and Bezos with \$195.1 billion (see Forbes 2021, *The Real-Time Billionaires List*, accessed 30/03/2022, <<https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/#1f2cf3c13d78>>) – a big leap in a few months, which says a lot about how fast disparity is increasing.

³² Gawain Kripke, 2016, *Rich People Can End Poverty*, Oxfam, accessed on 30/03/2022, <<https://politicsofpoverty.oxfamamerica.org/rich-people-can-end-poverty>>; Homi Kharas, 2021, *Elon Musk, billionaires, and the United Nations: The 1% solution to global development*, Brookings, accessed 26/05/2022, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2021/11/05/elon-musk-billionaires-and-the-united-nations-the-1-solution-to-global-development>>.

³³ The fact that Pogge wrote in 2010 does not drastically change the situation reported if compared with today. The UN website states that “Today, progress is being made in many places, but, overall, action to meet the Goals is not yet advancing at the speed or scale required. 2020 needs to usher in a decade of ambitious action to deliver the Goals by 2030” (United Nation, *The Sustainable Development Agenda*, accessed on 26/05/2022, <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda>>). Covid-19 pandemic worsened the situation in many cases.

³⁴ See data (updated to 2014) from Credit Suisse 2013, *Global Wealth Report 2013*, accessed on 20/03/2022, <<https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/global-wealth-report-databook-2013.pdf>> and Ayele, S., Fuentes-Nieva, R., Hardoon, D., 2016, *An Economy For the 1%: How privilege and power in the economy drive extreme inequality and how this can be stopped*, Oxfam International, <<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/an-economy-for-the-1-how-privilege-and-power-in-the-economy-drive-extreme-inequ-592643/>>.

and environment (Moore 2016; Von Weizsäcker & Wijkman 2018), as clearly stated in the *World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency*: “The climate crisis is closely linked to excessive consumption of the wealthy lifestyle” (Ripple et al. 2020: 8).

I.3.3. *Ecological collapse*

David Attenborough's 2020 documentary (and book) *A Life on Our Planet* is a popular example that shows how pressing ecological concerns are coming to the common understanding. Entire ecosystems are strictly related to human life, which can no more – after the implicit self-reflection contained in the proposal of the Anthropocene (often collapsed in the term Capitalocene) – be considered as disjointed from a network comprising the whole environment.

Environmental issues have been discussed and pointed out since years, and attempts of solutions are now implemented in national and transnational plans. Nonetheless, ruthless environmental destruction (for economic reasons) did not stop nor slow down, but increased. After the *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity* of 1992, signed by around 1700 scientists among which many Nobel laureates, in 2017 the *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice* followed, signed by more than fifteen thousands scientists (making it the article with more co-authors and signers ever published). Unfortunately, many proposals and calls for change and prevention had failed – from the Kyoto conference to Aichi.

Various problems are included in the ecological one: overpopulation and overconsumption; disparity and poverty; loss of biodiversity and mass extinction. All of these problems clearly show how human influence, the focus of the Anthropocene, is related to them, and how therefore the environment cannot be thought of as a distinct “thing” anymore. The problems here highlighted are, again, strictly related, and a solution to one of them requires to work on different levels:

[t]he gravity of the situation requires fundamental changes to global capitalism, education, and equality, which include *inter alia* the abolition of perpetual economic growth, properly pricing externalities, a rapid exit from fossil-fuel use, strict regulation of markets and property acquisition, reigning in corporate lobbying, and the empowerment of women. These choices will necessarily entail difficult conversations about population growth and the necessity of dwindling but more equitable standards of living. (Bradshaw et al., 2021: 6).

In order to avoid “untold human suffering”, for the signers of these warnings mankind has to face the unprecedented ecological, global emergency it is experiencing, adopting measures to “prevent widespread misery and catastrophic biodiversity loss” (Ripple et al. 2017: 1028).

In this respect, it should be noticed that Buddhism is generally seen as eco-friendly (Kaza 2018; Loy 2018). It also has some “engaged” nuances, that can be diverse and debatable (Queen 2018) but are generally implied in the attempt to overcome *dukkha*. This eco-friendly approach is related to the understanding of the relationship between humans and environment as not structured in a direct subject-object, active-passive relationship, based on the understanding of “beings” as empty of *svabhāva*, or self-being (on which more later). What should be highlighted once more is the need to shift from an individualistic to a relational

logic. Again, the problem emerging from our “anthropocenic” understanding clearly show that mass extinction and loss of biodiversity are a problem for mankind as well:

The extinction crisis, like the toxification and climate crises to which it is tied, poses an existential threat to civilization. Although it is more immediate than climate disruption, its magnitude and likely impacts on human well-being are largely unknown by governments, the private sector, and civil society (Ceballos et al. 2020: 13601).

This loss of biodiversity is a self-induced danger for mankind, but it also implies suffering for animals and the ecosystems they live into.

1.3.4. *Animal suffering*

Not only humans suffer: for Buddhism, all sentient beings (even more, all *dhamma*) are entrenched in *dukkha*. The Western perspectives on this point have been various but generally different, although recently things are changing.³⁵ Today we know that humans had and still have a great impact on biodiversity, to the point that our activity has reduced wild mammals to 4% of the world total biomass, with humans at 34% and livestock and pets making the 62% (of which 47% is made by cattles and pigs; poultry is not included, not being mammals, but their biomass is more than double of all other birds). In such an unbalanced environment, mankind “make up only 0.01% of life on Earth, but have and continue to have, a disproportionate impact on other aspects of life”.³⁶ This loss of biodiversity is therefore related to food production and the destruction of the environment in which wildlife can thrive in accordance with human projects.

Animal suffering includes a range of physical and emotional pain (Foer 2009; King 2017) that are strongly related to food production. On a side note, this opens the problem of food waste, which in 2019 was estimated to be around 931 million tonnes – in other words, 17% of world food production is wasted, and much of this (61%) comes from households, meaning that the responsibility is distributed.³⁷ So an immense number of animals are facing different forms of suffering to be processed to become food, which in a considerable part is even wasted. This is certainly related to environmental, social and economic problems, but it also involves an immense amount of suffering, since “[a]nimals raised for meat or dairy, or animals meant to become seafood, are suffering, and our entire Earth is suffering in ways that animal agriculture contributes to disproportionately” (King 2021: 151).³⁸

This massive production of pain can be easily hidden through a series of rhetoric and

³⁵ See for example *Animal Sentience* (URL: <<https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/animsent/>>), a wide repository of articles about animal sentience, where experts in the fields of Biology, Animal Studies, Comparative and Evolutionary Psychology, and more, discuss theoretical perspectives and often call for action to be taken with regard to animal and general sentient beings’ welfare.

³⁶ For the previous paragraph I refer to Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, 2021, *Biodiversity*, OurWorldInData.org, accessed 26/05/2022, <<https://ourworldindata.org/biodiversity>>.

³⁷ See the PDF document available at United Nations, *Food Waste Index Report 2021*, accessed 26/05/2022. <<https://www.unep.org/resources/report/unep-food-waste-index-report-2021>>.

³⁸ It may be that certain animals, such as sharks and cartilaginous fish (Rose et al., 2014), do not possess the nociceptors that will give them the feeling of pain. Nonetheless, since 1) we are not sure of how they process their internal states; 2) they may identify with an internal state and find it somewhat unpleasant (e.g. to be fished and removed from their habitual environment, so even if not experiencing bodily pain they may possibly feel some kind of distress); 3) their killing, even if not painful at all, may lead to a disruption of certain links in the ecosystem – all this making their killing not ethically justifiable, not to say counterproductive for mankind, too.

narrative devices. In fact, it is not simply the “habit” of meat consumption that allows for such system: meat is re-designed, re-imagined, and the passage from the living being to the finite product (being it the plastified piece of meat or the already hyper-processed restaurant dish) is ritualized.³⁹ The product obtained has to be processed through different “ritual” phases so that the encounter with it may be devoid of any responsibility or guilt – even “sexualized” in the way it is proposed: “[t]hrough butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist” (Adams 2012: 66). This whole process, to which we assist and consent constantly and mindlessly, is essentially about forgetting – “not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about” (Pollan 2006: 10).

As it will be made clearer, animals, as well as all other sentient beings and non-living things, so the whole elements of reality, are involved in the radical crisis that is not only human, as much as humans are not just in and for themselves.

Poverty and disparity, environmental issues and widespread suffering of the living is detrimental to everyone, and in this particular historical moment is pointing toward an ulterior concern, that of the end of the world – the extension of the radical crisis to a worldwide level.

I.4. How to cope with the radical crisis?

There can be, and indeed there have been, many ways to face the problems here grouped under the umbrella-term “radical crisis” – from the *Μελέτη Θανάτου* as a wider Greek philosophical enterprise of preparation to death, to heroic acceptance of pain and Stoic *amor fati*, from Indian understanding of life as distinct in times and scopes (*tri-artha*) to Manichean dualism, from Gnostic and Hermetic “flee” from the world to Christian “being in the world but not of the world” and attempts to conjugate love for the world God gave to mankind with a tension to its transcendence; and many more. In the perspective of de Martino, all cultural strategies which establish a mythical and ritual reiteration work under metahistorical presuppositions, to be superseded by a historical salvation (I will discuss this point further on).

For the purpose of the present thesis, all these problems are presented to show how the radical crisis lies at every level of our experience and how much our actions are related to each other, with these issues being co-dependently arising and, thus, can reach from the smallest and individual level to the world threat and the experience of the end of the world. I am not listing these problems to try to directly solve them, but I would like to highlight how the understanding of our relational presence implies, by necessity, and coherently with our own aims, to widen the care we so often concentrate on ourselves (on our *selves*). Showing this web of relations and co-dependency between the various forms of suffering in the world may help clarify what presence is and how this, in turn, can try to solve the problem of the radical crisis.

³⁹ About the need of “hiding the knife” in the process of killing and consuming meat, from sacrifice in ancient Greece and India to nowadays, see the classical works of Marcel Détiéne & Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*. Paris, Gallimard, 1979; and Charles Malamoud, *Cuire le monde: Rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris: La Découverte, 1989.

This is the main point of contact between Western thought and de Martino with Buddhism and Nāgārjuna. Through the end of the world – the most powerful expression of the radical crisis that finally encompasses not only one’s experience or limited reality, but the whole world one lives in and shares – it is possible to perceive the cracks and aporias of the self, and the need for a soteriological strategy to solve the crisis. This is what I will try to do in the following pages. I will first turn to Nāgārjuna to see what his fundamental work can tell us about the radical crisis, then see how de Martino can shed light on the same and some more emerging problems, before trying to put together some results.

II. The Middle Way – Emptiness

We have seen how the radical crisis encompasses all of human existence: consequently, it inheres and pervades all human acts, thoughts, speech, and is shown more or less clearly in every cultural product. We have seen what *dukkha*, or the radical crisis, means, analyzing different levels of it up to the end of the world, of every possible world, of the very idea of being present for anyone anymore. But now we have to ask ourselves, more specifically and deeply: what *causes* this crisis?

II.1. The No-Self Doctrine

According to Buddhism's general understanding, *dukkha* is caused – better, is embedded in a chain of co-causation – by the construction (although intuitive, primary, embodied into our cognition) of a subject-object relationship. We appropriate the world as if the I, the subject, were a transcendental part of the world (indeed, this is what an author such as Kant said):

in a kind of cognitive reflex—one that in contemporary terms seems to be part of our evolutionary endowment—we take the objects we encounter and ourselves to be independent entities, to be permanent, and to have intrinsic characteristics (Garfield 2015: 9).

Another evolutionary feature stressed by some authors (Metzinger 2003, 2008; Legrand 2013) is transparency: this means that we are “programmed” to act, in some cases at least, without noticing or being able to access the causal process that leads to the action. This transparency effect is especially clear with regard to the self: when analyzed as objects, we can become aware, with difficulty and limitations, of “our selves”, but most of the time we simply live and perceive a first-person experience which, exactly because so ingrained, is transparent and given for granted. This forgetfulness and unawareness towards our own means of knowledge (Varela & Maturana 1992) is possibly one of the most important cofactors of our ignorance: ignorance of how we know and, therefore, of how we ignore.

It seems like the sense of self is then something inevitable and essential for our existence. Instead, Buddhism, in all its forms, proposes the doctrine of *anattā*, or no-self. Nāgārjuna, too, accepts this tenet, but, coherently with the Buddha's teachings and with radical commitment, goes much further from the simple negation of a self.

II.1.1. *Atman vs. anatman*

To better understand Nāgārjuna's proposal, it is necessary to contextualize it so as to see from where it comes, which historical and cultural presuppositions it implies and how similar or distant from those it is. First and foremost, it should be stressed that, in the Indian philosophical and religious trajectory, the Buddhist soteriological proposal differs from others for a central point, that is, the notion of *atman*:

[w]hat sets Buddhism apart from other Indian liberation projects is its rejection of the idea of a self as an essence or pole of identification. The crucial mistake we make is not that we identify with the wrong sort of thing, but that we identify at all. Buddhists claim that what they call the ‘I’-sense, the sense of being a persisting subject of experience

and agent of action, is misleading and the source of existential suffering (Siderits 2020: 104)

This sharp distinction between Buddhism and all the rest of the Indian world is, anyway, misleading or even incorrect and – as every discourse – at the service of some agenda. As more than one author has pointed out, in fact, other Indian schools of thought had developed (in time, and also in reaction to Buddhism, which in turn reacted and eventually divided into different schools) complex theories of the self, many of which do not see it as substantial, but not for this reason they do reject it completely:

In ordinary experience, it seems that the unity of consciousness is undeniable. It is expressed in a variety of ways: the idiosyncratic use of the first-person ‘I’, memory, phenomenal consubjectivity, emotion, desire and agency. Arguably, *ātmavādins* explain these phenomenological features better than Buddhists who deny self. At the same time, such issues as narrative and the construction of personhood, the problematic sense of the body as itself the whole self, meditative deconstruction of ego, and so on, which are well known in the contemporary understanding of Buddhism, are equally dealt with in detail by several Hindu schools. (Ram-Prasad 2012: 12)

Nonetheless, it is the soteriological goal and path of Buddhism that implies and somehow requires – with many different formulations – such an account of the self. Moreover, this point of the doctrine is in no way a tenet, but is rather the result of a phenomenological analysis (Magno 2002: 344) which is provisional and linguistically determined, i.e. empty, as we will see. Therefore, the fact that other Indian (as well as Western) philosophical schools hold different perspectives about the self is not of particular importance here.

Another important point to be made is that *self* differs from *person*. The term person is, in Buddhist soteriology, “opaque” in the sense that its being enumerative is not “transparent”, as it can be when talking about pairs, dozens, and so on. By clarifying the enumeration behind the person (for the Buddhist doctrine, a series of psychophysical aggregates) it is possible to stop giving ontological value to the term person, as there is not such a thing as an ontology of dozens – if not a weak one (Siderits 2020: 105–6). In this way, the term person and what follows is “saved”, without maintaining its substantiality and what follows.

Moreover, a person being a composite of psychophysical aggregates, they will be composed as well and – unless we are to fall in the same mistake that Nāgārjuna criticizes in other Buddhist schools, that is, the substantiality of *dhammas* (as minimum elements of reality) – it will never be possible to find a grounding. Thus, aggregates being empty, the person is ultimately not grounded (or the grounding is unreachable, which pragmatically is the same), therefore persons are insubstantial. Parts and wholes are co-dependent, so that neither exist without (conventional) relation to the other (Garfield 2015: 33). This is, in a nutshell, what emptiness means for our personal existence. With Nāgārjuna, we do not find simply *anattā* but rather an insistence on *sūnyatā*, emptiness: for the radical soteriological path that he proposes, accepting the thesis that there is no self would in fact amount to having a position, thus grasping something and being back again in the game of *dukkha*. Therefore, it becomes necessary to understand better how Nāgārjuna apparently re-designs Buddhist doctrine and what exactly does “emptiness” mean.

II.2. Emptiness

We have seen how Buddhism proposes, against the main Indian traditional philosophical understanding, a no-self view. Nāgārjuna takes this to a new extent, shifting the emphasis from *anattā* to *sūnyatā* – *dukkha* derives from the impermanence of existence, which in turn derives from the absence of self-nature (*svabhāva*) and grounding, which implies the co-dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*). *Anattā* is still a central tenet: absence of self-nature is what causes the relentless logic of the Madhyamaka master to conclude that no thesis, not even the no-self view and the whole Buddhist enterprise, exist in itself. In a sense, emptiness is just a radical application of *anattā*.

II.2.1. *What is “emptiness”?*

Buddhism points out a contradiction into our existential experience, which is what mainly produces the radical crisis. This contradiction is our innate, mostly non-reflexive reification of a stream of experience, non-critically assumed to be a self, individual core which structures experience as a subject-object relation. This is the grasping, which inevitably brings *dukkha*, and cannot be overcome if not with a path, a therapy. This is the goal of “emptiness”.

The contradiction in question is that between things considered as stable and their impermanence, the stream of experience. This contradiction is intrinsic in this appropriative operation so deeply embedded in our existence, which produces *dukkha*. By living this way, we often expect coherency, autonomy and permanence from the “things” we try to grasp and that, for our common and acritical understanding, are perfectly real, essentialized, pre-reflexively ready-made objects of experience of some appropriating subject. Nāgārjuna, sharpening the words of the Buddha, tries to show how there cannot be such a thing as appropriation of things by selves, but instead what we have is mutual dependencies (Magno 2016: 237). To this result, Nāgārjuna talks about “emptiness”. But what, exactly, is “emptiness”?

“Emptiness” can best be understood as a linguistic designation or operator (Magno 2012; Magno 2016); “according to Chinese San-Lun Buddhists, is not a descriptive term but a soteriological or tactical device” (Cheng 1991: 10). Emptiness, therefore, is not another thesis that adds or proposes itself as alternative to what it refuses, nor (which is often the same) an ontological assumption. As such, emptiness is empty too, being not a “thing”, and whoever takes it as a theory is called “incurable” (MK 13: 8).

Emptiness, as a soteriological device, implies the rejection of *svabhāva*, that is, the substance or self-identity of something:

To say that something exists, whether it is a proton, a person or a national deficit, is to presuppose that it has an identity. If we cannot say what it is that exists, an existence claim is empty (Garfield 2015: 36).

For Buddhism, we cannot ascribe an identity to anything. If reality shows its *absolute-contradictory self-identity* (Nishida 1987), then any object of perception is not actually such but, in fact, emerges as a pattern in codependency with others, similarly empty. At the same time, it seems that reality is ‘absolutely contradictory self-identical’ (Kreutz 2021: 4) in the sense that an appearance of identity emerges, albeit contradictory (these

problems will be faced more thoroughly later on). Identity is something contradictory we try to grasp and, failing, we fall into dukkha:

Identity is the result of a process of identification, of gradual appropriation of existence. Therefore, the de-identification does not represent the elimination of a grounding, instead the de-creation of a derivative that disappears as I through the awareness of such derivation. (Magno 2002: 351)

Emptiness, therefore, and once again, is a soteriological means to detach, remove, abolish this impossible grasp over an impossible thing. Nāgārjuna insisted on this in his writings:

This is the supreme truth: the teaching of the unsubstantiality; this one is the insuperable medicine for those captured by the monster of (the false belief in) being (C: III, 52).

More broadly, since any idea and discourse may imply a persistence of attachment and a dualism, emptiness implies the rejection of every position – as exemplified in the imagined dialogue of MK, in which a set of positions is brought forth by an ideal opponent⁴⁰, that we can imagine as anyone holding any position – through the logical deconstruction of it. This rejection is not a negation – which would amount to just another position – but is, instead, the refusal of a position, of something already put forth. In more analytic terms: Nāgārjuna's operation is not to say $\neg A$, but, instead, $\neg(A)$: the whole position is rejected, instead of denied. The negation implies an either/or sort of result, while rejection only implies that the thesis has been not accepted, without need to endorse any other one. The path for liberation means to let go of any thesis:

The great beings (mahatman) hold no thesis; they do not debate.

For those persons who hold no thesis, how can there be a contrary thesis? (YS, v. 50)

Nāgārjuna uses emptiness to dissolve the objects of cognition and, therefore, dukkha, the grasping having become impossible for lack of both object and subject. The discussion in MK focuses on the status of emptiness and the Middle Way, which does not entail nihilism as the opponent seems to think – the real nihilist, in fact, appears to be the opponent (Katsura & Siderits 2013: 117), who keeps reifying reality and therefore can fall prey of the nihilist error, arising in dialectical relation to substantialism. Nāgārjuna, instead, shows the conventional existence of things, which arise in codependence:

The dependent existence of things is said to be emptiness, for what is dependently existent is lacking substance (VV: XXII).

Codependent arising is emptiness, or what emptiness implies. The mistake, therefore, is on the opponent's part. The fact that things are empty only means that they arise in codependence, without any need for a substance:

⁴⁰ Although imagined, the opponent of Nāgārjuna is actually an Abhidarmika philosopher, i.e. a Buddhist philosopher belonging to a different school which holds that *dhammas* – the basic components of reality in Buddhist metaphysics – are real. Nāgārjuna's critique, therefore, goes radical and it is somewhat cryptic because it is directed against people sharing the same soteriological milieu. In any case, for the sake of my argument, I will hold that the opponent can be idealized and understood as anyone proposing any thesis.

Those things which are dependently arisen are not endowed with substance, because there is no substance. Why? Because of the dependence on causes and conditions. If things existed substantially they would exist without causes and conditions; however, they do not exist in this way. Therefore they are said to be without substance, and because they are without substance, empty. (Westerhoff 2010: 27)

To be empty of self-nature is not a condition one can possess, like saying “I am without self”, which is instead the condition of one who grasps the identification, thus is still immersed in *dukkha*, but feels this loss and precipitates into the loss of the presence – what, as we will see, de Martino calls “psychopathological apocalypse”. To be empty is, instead, the condition of all things, codependently arising. The Buddha and then Nāgārjuna do not affirm the view that “things are without being”: instead, the soteriological strategy is to refuse (not deny) that things have *svabhāva* as well as that they do not have, that they both have and do not have, and that they have neither, i.e. reject every position, since any of such positions will amount to put substantiality in things – to cognize actual, real, grounded, things – and grasp them. In the *Samyutta-nikaya* II, I, 15 the Buddha expresses this by saying that it is an extreme to hold that things possess being, and also that they do not have. It can be said that, in this sense, Nāgārjuna does not take a position about things, but rather refers to our deeply rooted make-believe that produces reality as made of discreet identities (Magno 2016: 237). In MK, Nāgārjuna shows how every constituent of what we call reality is empty, and can be deconstructed and made to explode using its own presuppositions. In the case of the subject – which, in any case, will be mistaken to treat as a separate, discrete entity – Nāgārjuna shows how it arises in codependency with what it appropriates of, therefore giving way to *dukkha*, too:

pratītya kāraṇaḥ karma taṃ pratītya ca kāraṇam |
karma pravartate nānyat paśyāmaḥ siddhikāraṇam ||

The agent occurs in dependence on the object, and the object occurs in dependence on the agent; we see no other way to establish them. (MK: VII, 12)⁴¹

Thus, the moment the appropriation ceases, the subject disappears, and vice versa – the two being codependent, if the subject is removed, so is appropriation, and with it the constituents of the crisis. This exposition regarding the subject and its objects can be extended to the whole of our experience, but is here particularly important since we perceive ourselves *as selves*, in fact, who cognize a reality that allows itself to be grasped. This whole picture (which, according to Westerhoff 2009b, we may call the “standard picture”) is rejected by Buddhism in general and by Nāgārjuna in particular.

It may seem, then, that emptiness is somewhat an easy concept to grasp and to apply: one only needs to see how things are absurd when conceived as independent, and how this view about reality and ourselves gives way to what we called the radical crisis. By letting go of such grasping – through a process that includes practice and meditation – one can overcome the subject-object dichotomy with its necessary failure and its logic of perpetual and eternally unsatisfied desire. But things are not so easy. Paradoxically – given the refusal of all views by

⁴¹ Katsura & Siderits 2013: 117.

Nāgārjuna and the role of emptiness in this refusal – many views have succeeded themselves on this *vexata quæstio*.

Many questions, in fact, arise, and the Buddhist tradition has widely discussed Nāgārjuna’s work. Among the main questions of interest for this thesis are: the very status of emptiness – is it acceptable, and why? Does it work, or does it contradict itself? Can we talk and think about it? How is action, cognition, and ethics possible after Nāgārjuna’s critique? How are we to think and experience our “selves”, now no more there? As we will see, things are not so easy (at least for not-yet-liberated beings).

To try to explain emptiness in Western terms, it may be useful to turn to more recent philosophical positions. In the previous century, essentialism, with its array of terms such as “objectivity”, “meaning”, “truth”, etc. has been deeply questioned by authors like Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson, Sellars, Kuhn, as well as by the textual (post)critique of Barthes, Said, Foucault, Derrida, Gadamer, Bloom and Rorty⁴² – the latter summing up the general attack coming from this wave as holding that

[a] certain framework of interconnected ideas—truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation—ought to be abandoned. They are not, however, claiming to have discovered the real nature of truth or language or literature. Rather, they say that the very notion of discovering the nature of such things is part of the intellectual framework we must abandon—part of what Heidegger calls “the metaphysics of presence”, or “the onto-theological tradition” (Rorty 1982: 140).

If every interpretation is not a “discovery” of some truth, but a construction of it, co-produced within the relational context, then we can never talk of emptiness, as much as we cannot ever talk about anything else. Whenever one asserts that Nāgārjuna, very much alike Wittgenstein, argues that “like utterances in a language game, nothing can be shown to exist except as a participant in a complex network of interrelations” (Tuck 1990: 86), this assertion cannot be made if not in a co-dependent way: the reading does not exist out of a context which is thus not right or wrong but always only contextually acceptable.

The scholarship after Wittgenstein, thanks to a new context which sees philosophy as “therapy” (Wittgenstein 1953: 91; 1956: 157), had an easier game to understand Nāgārjuna’s non-position, emptiness as a soteriological way. Thus, the “post-Wittgensteinian” scholarship proposes that

both Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna offer a functionalist view of language (“meaning as use”) and that their reservations about any linguistic expression of “Truth” lead to a parallel skepticism about the utility of every philosophical formulation (Tuck 1990: 28),

presenting Nāgārjuna as a sort of “metaphilosopher”. These last interpretations open another problem, namely: if emptiness defies *every* discourse, reducing our intellect to an inevitable silence, can we talk about it at all?

II.2.2. *Can we talk about “emptiness”?*

Does “emptiness” refer to something? Is it a method? Is it *something*? Can we say that emptiness “is”, or predicate anything about it? Can we say something about it without falling

⁴² For this passage I refer to the precious list – here shortened and paraphrased – provided by Tuck 1990: 14.

into contradiction, and, most importantly, since we are just trying to analyze Nāgārjuna's work in academic fashion, and therefore do not need to adhere to his proposal (and, even if we were to accept it, we should not accept it as *something* since emptiness erases itself once it is understood – more on this later): is Nāgārjuna contradicting himself? And, in this case, is such a contradiction problematic?

In a famous verse, Nāgārjuna stated to have no thesis, a position which has stirred many questions and possible answers (and that, moreover, can hardly be ascribed as a position or a view at all). The most clear exposition of the no-thesis view comes from the *Vigrahavyavartani*:

If I had any thesis, that fault would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so there is indeed no fault for me. (VV: XXIX)

As noted by Westerhoff (2009b: 26), this statement is even more problematic than the ladder of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, since while the analytic philosopher is asserting the mere instrumentality of discourse, he is not denying of producing any discourse at all. This gap distances Nāgārjuna from Wittgenstein, albeit the similarity is still promising to some.⁴³ To explain Nāgārjuna's non-position (which, nonetheless, can have *real effects* about how we conceive things), it can be said that

no assertion is to be taken to refer to a ready-made world of mind-independent objects, nor can he assume that there is a structural similarity linking word and world which is independent of human conceptual imputation. (Westerhoff 2009b: 37)

The lack of a correspondence between word and world, mind-independent objects and subjective knowledge of them, reference to ultimate truth and, in general, the critique of the above mentioned ontotheological tradition, shows how contemporary Western philosophy got closer to Buddhist ideas. It may seem, also, that it is possible to make sense of Nāgārjuna's claim of holding no thesis, by rejecting the "standard picture" of correspondence – that is to say, by re-imagining our whole experience of reality.

Even if we are to accept the special status of Nāgārjuna's discourse, anyway, it still seems to be problematic for the fact that it becomes impossible to use it, since emptiness and gradual teaching means that we need to provisionally endorse others' discourse, use their own way of debate (therefore accepting logic, analogy, and other means of knowledge – in ancient India, *pramana* – as provisional) and also Buddhism itself, as Nāgārjuna's work shows. Therefore, in order to talk and say that he has no thesis, Nāgārjuna somehow has to accept to enter in the thesis arena, so as to be able to reject them; he has to accept, implicitly, some things.

We have seen that emptiness entails the absurdity and self-contradiction of any thesis. This is done by Nāgārjuna using the opponent's own thesis, without bringing forward his own. Nāgārjuna's critique consists in showing the inconsistencies of any thesis as a soteriological means; no thesis holds, no ground exists for things, therefore no grasping is possible, and liberation becomes possible. Emptiness is just an operator without consistency, that has been shown and presented as empty itself, thus not something to grasp, which seems to remove Nāgārjuna from error.

⁴³ See for example Smith 2021.

But what can be seen through this is that Nāgārjuna’s critique implies a certain worldview – not openly stated, maybe, but actually present in the dedicatory stance, for example – which takes shape behind the empty discourse. Nāgārjuna’s MK, after all, is not mere philosophical exercise, on the contrary: it is a soteriological, Buddhist path which wants to counter every possible discourse which reifies and reiterates attachment, thus *dukkha*. This is the radical Buddhist Middle Way, which, even if built as empty, considered not-substantial, etc., is nonetheless there. Practices are built on something; *dukkha* is considered on the base of some theses; and emptiness is produced in a dialectical relation with other discourses – as empty of self-nature:

*Vyavahāram anāsritya paramārtho na desyate |
paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇam nādhigamyate ||*

The ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking.
Not having acquired the ultimate truth, nirvāṇa is not attained. (MK XXIV: 10)⁴⁴

Thus emptiness, being empty itself, is not independent but rather codependent with reality. Moreover, as shown by this passage, emptiness entails another problematic theoretical point, namely the problem of *dve satye* (two truths).

While presenting emptiness and the nature of things, Nāgārjuna seems to say that there are two truths about reality – the conventional one, and the ultimate. The conventional truth is the one which allows Nāgārjuna to talk about things, while the ultimate is that all discourse is dispelled. But soon we understand that the two truths are interrelated, since one calls for the other. To talk about the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*), one requires the conventional one – not unlike one who needs a recipient to take water, as Candrakīrti’s commentary goes⁴⁵ – so that the ultimate level is not only needing, but actually “grounded” in, the conventional. Without conventional reality, i.e. discourse, *paramārtha* (that which goes beyond meaning) cannot be pointed out. (Magno 2016: 338–9).

Here at least two problems arise. The first, obvious problem with non-dualism is its intrinsic dualism: “the distinctions of dualism versus non-dualism and unreality versus reality are themselves dualistic” (Hanegraaff 2022: 359; see also Loy 2019). To think that ultimate reality is non-dual means that 1) there is a dualism about the real, in that “ultimate reality” is opposed to a conventional one; 2) there is a dualism that is being denied, thus re-producing this very dualism (in other words, something, or everything, is non-dual, therefore posing the dialectical opposite of something). Ultimate reality transcends dichotomies and, discourse being dichotomous or dialectical, ultimate reality is also over- or extra-discursive. But this outcome can only be possible after having built the object as such, hiding the modes of such building and concealing.

The second problem, connected to the first, is that the two truths are interrelated, but somehow incommensurable. This aporia in which the two imply and exclude each other has been explained somehow with paraconsistent logic: “Nāgārjuna’s account of the relation between the two truths is already pregnant with paradox: they are asserted to be both distinct (24.8–10) and not distinct from one another (24.18)” (Deguchi 2021: 60). But this seems to be

⁴⁴ Katsura & Siderits 2013: 276.

⁴⁵ L. de la Vallée Poussin 1903-1913, XXIV, 10.

problematic, too. In fact, this view has to be rejected, being a thesis about something: so in a sense emptiness resolves itself in abolishing its own non-proposal.

To put it in another way: the “doctrine of two truths” does not solve the problem of how we experience reality through ignorance and how, by walking the path, we can obtain liberation – in fact, it makes it more complex. The two truths point to a realization to come, that will come when all this is overcome and left behind; but how does this happen without committing to any view, rejecting any dialectics, and removing cognition and thought? This is, in fact, the apparent outcome of a rejection of every reification and attachment: “the forgetfulness of words and annihilation of thoughts” (Ibid: 69).

Nāgārjuna’s work can be seen as contradictory, therefore absurd, that is, empty. Here, anyway, some theorists intervene to fix this problem by claiming that it is only apparent: certain statements can actually be contradictory due to paraconsistency (their contradictions not entailing a logical explosion, i.e. implying everything else, thus being logically acceptable for contemporary logic). In this case, one can say that yes, Nāgārjuna contradicts himself, but this is acceptable, therefore there is no problem. Yet again, if what Nāgārjuna does is to denounce the contradictions in any statement, then how can he reject other’s views? The solution is, simply, that Nāgārjuna *has* to contradict himself with all he says, given that all of reality is inherently contradictory and non-coherent⁴⁶, when he denounces other’s view as incoherent and therefore empty, he does with himself, too, and Buddhism and every statement, emptiness itself being absurd and, in fact, empty. His contradiction lies in the use of *upāya*,⁴⁷ of using the conventional to show the ultimate, which are not distinct. But, as later exegetes – in China, Japan, Tibet – were to realize, such distinction also falls, and practice provides help to avoid mental proliferation. There may be no more objects nor subjects, but for those who are not liberated, the situation is still a dualistic one: therefore, to affirm that the status of reality – indeed, the real nature of things – is a specific one seems to be tantamount to holding a thesis, and a metaphysical one. Instead, even this should disappear if we are to understand emptiness and overcome dukkha. So in the end the point is not that we cannot talk about the object, but that it is not to be found (Bugault 1994: 179). There are no objects, but we have to walk and talk our way to it through conventional understanding.

In conclusion, it seems that, inasmuch as one avoids attaching to things and words, one actually *can* talk about emptiness. This should be done, outside the academic context, in

⁴⁶ If not perhaps locally and partially. Such a perspective – that no statement or set of statements can be coherent if not when limited, and that therefore reality as a whole can only be composed of patterns of coherency, assembled but always clashing – can be discussed but it will obviously require much more space. Moreover, in light of emptiness, it also shows itself as absurd, since there can be no parts nor wholes, etc. It should be noted, anyway, that coherence may as well be a perceptual mechanism (Westerhoff 2020: 7), a way to organize diverse and non-coherent data into an impression of coherence in order to allow operativity.

⁴⁷ *Upāya*, the “skillful means”, are said to be used by enlightened beings to show the path according to the needs and understanding of those who receive the teaching.

See *Ratnāvalī*, IV, 95-96: keṣāṃcidavadaddharmaṃ pāpebhyo vinivṛttaye | keṣāṃcītpuṇyasiddhayartham keṣāṃcidū dvayānīśritam || dvayānīśritamekeṣāṃ gambhīraṃ bhīrubhīṣaṇam | śūnyatākaruṇāgarbhamekeṣāṃ bodhisādhanaṃ ||. A translation (although from the Chinese text) follows:

There were some circumstances where he [the Buddha] proclaimed the Dharma / So that others would abandon the many forms of evil. In some cases he did so to inspire the creation of merit, / And in still other cases he did so to accomplish both priorities. // In some cases, he did so to banish these duality-based concepts, / Teaching extreme profundities alarming those of inferior capacity. / Sometimes emptiness and compassion were set forth as supreme / To allow others to gain perfect realization of bodhi (Dharmamitra 2009: 153).

synergy with practice, so as to gradually overcome the conceptual proliferation that will necessarily emerge when referring to any mental object. Indeed, not only one can, but one should or even must talk about it, from a Buddhist soteriological perspective; even without being able to use it without attachment, it may be said that emptiness can work as a means to the goal, supporting meditation and the walk through the soteriological path itself.

II.2.3. What does “emptiness” imply?

Nāgārjuna refuses every position – all the four alternatives of *catuskoṭi* – through the *prasajya pratiṣedha*, showing the aporias and inconsistencies of every assumption on reality, given that nothing can sussist independently and, therefore, no thesis can be given that is not self-contradictory. Following this refusal, no grasping can occur, and the end of appropriation of reality and of an illusory self is the end of *dukkha*. This is the soteriological goal of emptiness – a goal that, nonetheless, has to be implemented into a set of practices:

The reason why many forms of skeptical critique lead to cynicism, egoism, or social conformism is that the critique remains on the intellectual level, while the socially and historically constructed self, which consists not only of a collection of abstract ideas, but also, quite notably, of mental and behavioral dispositions, is not subjected to the ultimate critique through the transformative power of fully engaged practice. (Clark 2008: 26)

Emptiness as a deconstructive method, a “therapy”, or a skillful means (*upāya*) to bring to ultimate knowledge (*paramārtha, pariniṣpanna*), implies the full understanding of our being co-produced with and into the *pratītyasamutpāda*, thus seeing how there cannot be any proper subject-object distinction, no *svabhāva*, no being, no identity, no consistency, but only provisional, linguistic designation that have to be used in acknowledged functional-fictional ways. Nirvana, liberation, is thus no different from samsara, and to walk the path is to understand this:

Those men who do not see the truth are infatuated with the world and nirvana; those who perceive the truth are not infatuated with the world and nirvana.
Samsara and nirvana—both do not (really) exist. It has been taught that the perfect knowledge of samsara is nirvana.
(YS, vv. 5-6)

This supposedly means to see reality “as it is” (*tathā*), without a grasping superimposition; this is liberating, because it removes that primal attachment which is the source of *dukkha*: the belief in a self which “desires” and identifies with internal states. To reach this soteriological goal, however, is not easy and, after much talk about linguistic designation, it should be clear how this cannot be obtained by intellect only – as it may happen in the *prajñā-yoga* way presented in the *Bhagavad Gita* and later Hinduism, or in certain forms of Christian negative theology. The level of conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*), as Nāgārjuna warns us, is one of the greatest obstacles in the soteriological path of Buddhism.

This problem about the achievement of the perfect wisdom and the risk of continuous conceptual residuals has not gone unnoticed. In Vasubandhu’s later Yogacara elaboration, *pariniṣpanna*, the perfect knowledge, comes as a third stage – after the first of illusory knowledge and the second of conceptual understanding of emptiness (Anacker 2005; Magno 2016: 242). In fact, as it can be easily guessed, merely reading Nāgārjuna’s or the Buddha’s

words does not make us liberated beings. The soteriological path is such exactly because it requires and implies a “walk” which conjoins doctrine and practice. *Dukkha* being so embedded into our cognition, it is not enough to think about it, exactly as it is not enough to think of pain to remove it – in fact, this amounts to emphasizing all the more the identification with the perception. If language and thought are dualistic, if reality itself is incoherent and inconsistent, then practice can remove the attachments that the discourse, until revolving around its reifying system, cannot but continuously reproduce. Discourse is necessary and the ones who overcame it know this: “the Victorious, by force of necessity, have said *I* (and *mine*” (YS, v. 33). The discursive level can therefore act as a proposal, a persuasion to practice and start to see things differently:

The worldly delusion being accepted, the establishment of conventionally real entities, which are imagined like the water of a mirage, is through agreement on the basis merely of dependence of this on that and not in any other way. (La Vallée Poussin 1913: 188)

Soteriology has a pragmatic means: no need for justification, which will be just a way to further the ontological sickness – only persuasive narrative: *upāya* or skillful means.

If one is determined to try to solve this conundrum, one can see how the two truths are in fact no more than an *upāya*, a useful, skillful mean which resolves itself to be after a point useless; the two truths are seen again as one (Magno 2016: 239), the language-thought which starts the way and that is removed to complete it; they are one and their ultimate truth is that there is no truth (Siderits 2007: 182).⁴⁸ But again this would be an intellectual understanding of it, a satisfactory explanation which is nonetheless destined to fail. From an academic perspective, unless one adopts a different method, it seems there will always be the need to explain things out; from a practitioner’s perspective (which can go together with the academic one), the speculative interest may be directed towards a deeper understanding of the goals of one’s way, therefore attaining a sort of practical meaning. Knowledge becomes a different thing, something directed towards liberation, the end of the radical crisis.

II.3. The persistence of self-perception

After all this talk about emptiness – understood as a radical expression of *anattā* extended to all things, not just the personal self – a question arises, stepping away from the theoretical pedestal and returning to the lived, phenomenological experience: *who am I?* Said otherwise: what is this feeling and immediate apprehension of me, of the experience as first-person, not to say self-directed, free, and so very real? This question – which gives the sense of how important it is to conjoin theory and practice in the Buddhist path – can seem a hard one, and has to be unpacked carefully. The Buddhist tradition, in fact, is not forgetful about this, and it had all along held that insistence on answering the question *what am I really?* is just the problem to be overcome by Buddhist practice (Arnold 2018: 377). For de Martino, on the other hand, to know that we are is to know who we are – in a sense, reversing the Buddhist

⁴⁸ This view has been called the “semantic interpretation” and needs to be addressed as a specific view, albeit one that I find definitely valid. I cannot enter into a longer discussion here, but the interpretation, endorsed in particular by Siderits and Garfield, is only a particular take of Nāgārjuna’s work and has been challenged (see in particular Ferraro 2013 and the subsequent debate).

take on existence and subjectivity.

This is when de Martino will intervene. The Italian scholar has, in fact, very much to say about this, since he also emphasizes the impermanent, relational and unstable nature of things, albeit without a full-fledged refusal of the self nor a plea for its abandonment, instead asking for a never ending effort towards the rebuilding of human presence and operativity.

It is therefore necessary to turn our attention to de Martino and enter a tight dialogue with the Western tradition of thought, underpinning and developing his core ideas.

III. The Medium – Presence

Buddhism declares universal emptiness, and therefore the absence of our own self, our very immediate and apparently so very real and fundamental experience of a self, as well as that of reality. But is this experience fundamental, after all, or is it built, too? Moreover, the fact that the self, our self, is empty does not prevent us to feel, experience, and perceive as a first-person being – or does it?

For Western thought, the self has usually been something of a given, and our phenomenal first-person experience what grounds the world. Whole philosophies and *Weltanschauung* – metaphysics, epistemologies, ethics, economics, social and anthropological theories, as well as theodicies and apocalypses, entail the existence of the self. So it would seem a too bold move to simply remove it, or call it absent. Nāgārjuna gave reasons for that, but still some problems (apparently, at least) remain.

In what follows, I will try to disentangle this conundrum which constitutes the tension between our so very real phenomenal experience, our need to act, to ground out choices, and universal emptiness, with its declaration of absence of personal self, of absence of what allows for action (no causation, no subject nor object which can take part in any action, etc.) and of grounding. In doing so, I will first add to the Buddhist critique what contemporary philosophical and scientific perspective put forth regarding the self, showing how our experience of a self is, in fact, highly problematic even outside of Buddhism, and how it may not be needed. I will then move on to present de Martino's main ideas, trying to put them in context with the aid of more recent, up-to-date discussions, to see whether it is possible to get useful insights about the topics of subjectivity, the crisis, and more.

III.1. What does it mean to be in the world?

Faced with the challenge of other cultures, other experiences, the young Ernesto de Martino started to wonder whether these people, so often labeled by Western scholars “primitives”, were actually more than what was said of them – namely idiots, psychotics, pre-logic minds, precedent stages of evolution, or at best tricksters who deceived the anthropologists showing them miracles or telling them what they did not believe.⁴⁹

De Martino's fundamental insight since his first important book, *Il Mondo Magico*⁵⁰ (1948), groundbreaking for the Italian scholarly panorama, was instead that these people should have a very different *experience of themselves*, of their being in the world. In this sense, de Martino takes the ethnological other very seriously, accepting as a possibility the existence of magic

⁴⁹ These insulting nicknames have actually been given to the local people of the non-Western cultures that Western anthropologists encountered. The cultural and evolutionistic racism endorsed by many, on the line of Comte's stages or Spencer's misunderstanding and misuse of Darwin's insight, has long been rejected. Similarly, to talk about any cultural difference as madness or, in case of magic and strange events, as a trick – a more recent interpretation that comes together with the idea that also “locals” have agency, and can thus deceive or study anthropologists back – shows all the weight of the Western “master” gaze and the difficulty in understanding the other.

⁵⁰ The original work appeared in 1948 by the editor Einaudi. I will refer here to the latest version available to me at the time of writing (Ernesto de Martino, *Il Mondo Magico. Prolegomeni a una storia del magismo*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2019). As noted elsewhere, the book has been badly translated as *Primitive Magic*, while the title can be literally transposed as “The Magic World. Prolegomena to a History of Magic”, highlighting the historicist intent of the author.

powers and inquiring into them. This is one of the main reasons why *Il mondo magico*, since its publication, was so important and so criticized. De Martino, with his radical historicism, trusting “primitives” to be part of a shared reality, did the strange move of actually accepting, or at least not rejecting to ask himself – an atheist struggling for a civil religion – magic powers. All other alternatives were wrong: why not try to see the emic point of view? And so, with this “disquieting” start, de Martino asked himself and others how these shamans managed to do what they did, and why, and what they experienced. His answer is somehow unsettling: accepting the emic point of view, he had to accept that the very *presence* of these people was at times lost, always at risk, and this was what the shamanic rituals mostly contributed for and also how they worked through.

In short, what de Martino states, by reviewing ethnographic literature, is that shamans and all the people of “ethnographic interest” do not have the same feeling, conception and experience of the self that Western people have. This means that, while for “us” the self is a given, says de Martino, for other cultures it is something to be always reappropriated:

The personal presence, the being-in-the-world, the soul, “runs away” from its seat, can be “kidnapped”, “stolen”, “eaten”, and so on. (MM: 138).

Shamans take the “souls” (which of course are not to be intended in the Western, Christian, substantial sense) of those who lose them, but they can only do so because they themselves do not have a stable presence in the world. This means that there is an existential and metaphysical gap between the two worlds, the West and the rest (thus contributing to the prejudice and radical difference between “us” and “them”).

Ernesto de Martino concluded his first major work with an important remark:

The modern fight against any form of *alienation* of the products of human work requires as a historical condition the human effort to save the fundamental base of this fight – *the presence that remains granted in the world*. (MM: 222, italics in the original)

I maintain that this sentence contains some key ideas in relation to the radical crisis that need to be developed. While it would be impossible to go into the specific problems arising from this work, it must be reminded how this work is in an interesting position with respect to FM. His first and last works, they hold two almost opposite perspectives that, nonetheless, complete each other and show the intellectual trajectory of de Martino. If in MM the presence was threatened by the lack of a strong model or understanding of the self, thus shaping entire cultures (e.g. the “shamanic” cultures de Martino analyzed) but ultimately to be overcome by Western culture and its building of a solid sense of self, in FM instead this radical crisis is faced by mankind at large which puts at stake the possibility of being human and existing itself.⁵¹

De Martino’s work, therefore, challenges many of his contemporaries’ views, anticipating some developments and insights in anthropology, as well as trends that were to be opened only later on and are still crucial. In particular, I will focus here on the first-person experience

⁵¹ Therefore, in MM “ces états psychiques liés à la crise de l’unité synthétique du Moi constituent le pivot même de civilisations tout entières”, whereas in FM “la dissociation de la personnalité ou crise de la présence, est davantage envisagée comme une régression radicale par rapport à l’ordre humain” (Mancini 1999: 466).

– this *presence* that may change contextually, is never given, and always rebuilt; the relationship between presence and the world – the non-givenness of both, and their co-production; the radical crisis endowed into presence and the world and the need for an ethos – what I will try to analyze as a seed of soteriology.

III.1.1. *The phenomenal first-person experience*

Despite his noteworthy speculative power, de Martino was not to remain idle; always interested in the practical aspects of the problems faced, he was personally and directly involved in the events of his time. The very concern with the presence, his interest in other “forms of life”, the openness to the existence of magic, parapsychology, and so on, testify of his experience, at a young age, of a sort of derealization and depersonalization. Similar events have the power to change our self-perception:

The feeling puzzles the experiencers: the changed condition is perceived as unreal, and as discontinuous with his or her previous ego-states. The object of the experience, self (in depersonalization) or world (in derealization), is commonly described as isolated, lifeless, strange, and unfamiliar; oneself and others are perceived as ‘automatons,’ behaving mechanically, without initiative or selfcontrol. (Kihlstrom, 2001, p. 267)⁵²

These are events that, although being a kind of dissociative disorder, occur in mild form in around 50 to 74 percent of the population (Butcher et al. 2017: 308–9). Nonetheless, de Martino’s experience in this sense influenced quite heavily, I maintain, his own construction of both presence and radical crisis, becoming a sort of soteriology – extended to all of human experience, but, I would suggest, needed by de Martino first and foremost as a defense against such attacks. This distressing experience may show us how fragile, inconsistent and fundamentally different from our pre-given and naive understanding our “self” is. The self, in this sense, emerges as a symptom – as de Martino was to realize during his last years. The presence, as proposed by him, is in fact something that, continuously remade and valorized, emerges as a symptom of a fundamental lack, its own never being granted. Still, it is so necessary for us to act in the world, and so dreadful it is to lose it, that we continuously need to grasp it and reassure ourselves with its presence. Even if we are to look at ourselves from outside, in the grand scheme of things, we cannot but take care of ourselves – to perceive our nothingness perhaps, but necessarily positioning our experience in such nothingness:

From far enough outside my birth seems accidental, my life pointless, and my death insignificant, but from inside my never having been born seems nearly unimaginable, my life monstrously important, and my death catastrophic. (Nagel 1986: 209)

It may be replied, especially from the field of religious studies, that some emic narratives account for the overcoming of death (or at least its fear), the reduction of self-regard, the disappearance of the self, or its transcendence, or mystical states of unity, etc. This is all certainly true with respect to these narratives, but it can also be retorted that, admitting their

⁵² De Martino was strongly influenced by the work of Pierre Janet in conceiving the idea of the *presence* and its risk of loss: the development of a theory of the presence was shaped on Heidegger’s elaboration of In-der-Welt-Sein, but the ground of the theory comes from psychiatry and psychology. The quote from Kihlstrom is, in fact, related to the ideas of Janet. Note that contemporary studies rediscovered the pioneering work done in the field by Pierre Janet: see for example Craparo, Ortu & Hart, *Rediscovering Pierre Janet*, 2019.

possibility, the majority of people do not enjoy such states. In any case, the very experience of divine unity, or of being identical with the Absolute, requires, prior to it, a distinct experience as (at least apparently) independent cognizer. If (the experience of) unity is given from the start, there cannot be any dialectical process leading to it – to put it in radical terms, if there is something (substantial), there can be no experience at all. Therefore, what de Martino as a radical historicist scholar of religion does is to consider all these religious phenomena as real, but also as cultural products – without contradiction between the two. This will have to be elaborated further later on.

What I would like to highlight now is that some type of subjective experience seems necessary even to establish its own absence or negate it in any way. Moreover, even if someone has (or, claims to have) no self, or that originally there are no selves, that what we cognize as a subject in reality is not a subject if not for our erroneous perception, or that such pseudo-subject really is experiencing the Absolute, etc., we may ask: who is making such claims? Who is experiencing what? Who is thinking *x*, perceiving *y*, or understanding itself as something that even if ultimately not differentiated and substantial can nonetheless communicate with some other part (which cannot be part) of something? How do we address such an illusory subject (and object), if there is in fact none? How can the pseudo-subject address itself as non-addressable, how can a non-self deny a self that never existed?, and so on.

III.1.1. *The built nature of the non-built*

De Martino, while never in direct dialogue with Buddhism, may provide some answers to the problems listed above, mostly by showing how the mystical and supposedly ineffable experience is always *built* – an idea that he elaborates after his master, Benedetto Croce:

Mysticism denies that being, reality, God could be thought of through inductive or deductive methods of sciences as well as the speculative one proper of philosophy; but so little that being, reality, God is mysterious for the mystic that he embraces and possesses it in the fullness of feeling, of silent feeling, which, in truth, cannot refrain from the great sin of talking and reasoning of itself. (Croce 1951: 32)

In a very hegelian move, Croce shows how “mystery, logically understood, is not, therefore, the impenetrable and insolvable of thought, but actually the penetrable and solvable par excellence, the continuously penetrated and solved” (Ibid: 31). De Martino inherits this line of thought, to be exploited in the whole Italian panorama of religious studies, by focusing his attention on paranormal phenomena and mystical experience. In a rather long and convoluted passage from FM, de Martino confronts himself with this problem, in so doing carving out his theory of presence, value and the metahistorical level:

Until mystics talk, or anyway express themselves somehow, they in fact give witness either of the loss of presence or of its reintegration: and if such reintegration passes through the technical horizon of mythic-ritual metahistory, such metahistorical horizon takes part, as protective technique, of history and culture. When mystics keep silent, their ineffable All is at the threshold of Nothing. The human condition – as energy which transcends the situation into value – can be lost, but never “overcome”. The magico-religious claim of overcoming not just the situations of mundane values, but the

human condition itself through mythic-ritual metahistory, is a technical horizon of the alienation of presence as the operative center of society and history. This alienation is annihilation, shipwrecking: the mythic-ritual horizon stops, configures, recovers alienation, and re-discloses it to the mundane values compromised by the crisis; it takes part, therefore, of human history as technical horizon of signaling and reintegration, not as impossible pretense of escape from history. (FM: 432–33)

What does this passage mean? To the reader unfamiliar with de Martino and in general themes in the XX century debate about philosophy of religion and religious studies, it may be quite obscure. De Martino is here trying to show how no experience ever can go beyond the historical level, taking shelter in some metaphysical plane – which, in the wave of dialectical materialism and radical historicism, is rejected. Even the most radical experience we can think of – namely, the mystical union, the self-transcendence or deification – is always to be expressed and experienced by a presence, which has to valorize it, under threat of losing itself. What we know about mystical experiences is given to us by the narratives produced by those who experienced them first-hand, as well as by second-hand reports (followers of important religious figures, hagiographers, etc.) or even third-hand ones (writers of religious manuals, readers of second-hand report who believed in them and in the general framework of the mystical experience, etc.). Even if we admit, *ex hypothesis*, that the experience really *is ineffable*, this does not mean that it goes beyond history – the moment it is retold, valorized, it becomes history, even if treated as a metahistorical one and accounted for as ineffable. Taking de Martino's point further, or at any rate expanding it, I argued elsewhere that such valorization of the mystical experience takes place in the same moment that the mystics try to understand their own experience, in what we may say is essentially coincident with the experience itself – thus removing the ineffable from its absoluteness (Catanzaro 2021). The metahistorical experience is immediately made historical when the valorization takes place; if this does not happen, as de Martino notes, the presence is lost. To be present is, therefore, to have a phenomenal experience which is capable of being continuously valorized and expressed through contextual means. This does not mean that a self is necessary. We will now move on to try to see how this is possible.

III.2.3. *The mythic-ritual foundation of experience*

One of de Martino's core insights is that of religious experience as a form of protection from the irreversibility of existence. Our ineffable, incommunicable experience always has to be communicated – base presupposition of the persistence of the presence, so as to avoid cultural and psychopathological apocalypses – but this communication faces a major problem: the threat of its uniqueness, and, therefore, an abyss of incommunicability at its very heart:

The risk of losing the presence takes place in the critical moment of existence, when the naturality of what passes without and against us emerges. Religion is a technique: a) of dehistoricization of the critical passage; b) or reintegration of alienated psychic forces; c) of return to the historicity of existence [...] dehistoricization, that is, the concealment of historicity of the critical passage, is obtained through the rituality of action: one passes ritually, viz. Repeating what the numen [gods, heroes, or any other foundational figure] already did in metahistory. The historical is resolved as an identical metahistorical which

repeats itself. (FM: 435)

De Martino refers to a metahistorical plane which allows the historical event to exist – or, better, to unfold without its threat for the presence. The “naturalness” of experience, its being not-yet-culture, and therefore ineffable, needs to be passed into value (as will be explained) so as to become culture, history, and allow operativity. If experience is ineffable – the mystical one being the example *par excellence* due to its claim of being always such – then there is no way to understand it nor operate on it, no way to communicate nor, actually, understand the experience. This would lead to the loss of the presence – the impossibility of making world, of experiencing the world and its potentiality, remaining stuck into a loop of incommunicability which is the incomplete version of *anattā*: contrary to the liberating understanding of the no-self doctrine, the loss of presence implies the persistence of a self-experience, which is nonetheless stuck in its impossibility to experience, thus being frustrated and unable to escape its mental representation.

This is what, in de Martino’s perspective, triggers the mythic-ritual devices that protect from the threat of history. The metahistorical plane fulfills exactly this need of protection against the risk of the loss of the presence, thanks to the building of a “non-built”, metaphysical narrative in which the event “already took place”, in which mirroring one’s present, ineffable experience and through which explain out the ineffable. In de Martino’s words, the mythic-ritual symbol

accomplishes the technical function of dehistoricization of becoming: to stay in history as if not into it [“si sta nella storia come se non ci si stesse”], and to the risk of losing human history in the individual isolation of the crisis without perspectives it opposes an mode of protected existence, in which the possible of the historical existence is lived as if already happened in some mythical event, providing foundation and authenticity, as if already foreordained through some immutable decision, established once and for all on the plane of metahistory. (FSV: 66)

The “institution” of dehistoricization has played a major role in building civilizations and their own contextual declinations of it. The study of religions is concerned, therefore, with analyzing the different forms of mythic-ritual protection; all of them, nonetheless, are always to be reconducted to the main idea. De Martino, in FM, says that such institutions were⁵³ of the utmost importance and they produced, in fact, admirable results – culture, what today is value on which we build our own presence and, more banally and pragmatically, the works of art, literature, architecture, but also languages and human rights and whole mindsets which structure our understanding of reality. Nonetheless,

the point is if such historical angst implies by necessity a meta-historical salvation or if history, once arrived at the consciousness of its integral humanity, includes in itself its natural medicine, that is the consciousness that only the ethos of valorization, of which man carries the full responsibility, can save not from history but from angst. (FM: 262–3)

⁵³ And still are, somewhere: de Martino’s ethnographic work in the South of Italy focused on problem of the permanence of these protective means which, contextually, become less and less embedded in the shared culture (*Morte e pianto rituale*, 1958; *Sud e Magia*, 1959; *La terra del rimorso*, 1962).

The answer, for de Martino, is that it is time to overcome the metahistorical level and live radically into history, taking the responsibility of our actions: we should be able to love others not because their face is the face of Christ, but because it is their own (FM: 285), thus avoiding the *détour*, the mediation between me and the other.

For de Martino, therefore, history without metahistorical salvation is possible – but then, a problem arises: isn't history itself, according to de Martino's own analysis, myth, after all?⁵⁴ In fact, the very possibility of experience and of presence emerges from value, and value can only be given through the preexisting value which structures the presence in its dialectical relationality. Therefore, for every action to be understood and valorized, a base is needed, and this is value itself, the persistence of patterns; this can only happen if we always refer to the "given" so as to structure the present. History works on value, and value – even if operatively distinct in what de Martino calls history and metahistory – is essentially the use of valorized experience as a mythical foundation for action. Every action follows patterns embedded in biocultural contexts, therefore allowing an action to come forth only on the background of a previous one. While the perception of this action may differ – dehistoricization being a process to protect in front of the uniqueness and impermanence of existence, while history is supposedly the acceptance of this impermanence – still the need of patterns on which structuring operativity remains. Every action is built on some "mythic-ritual" pattern, in the sense of a reiteration which embodies difference, or *différance*, following Derrida's lesson.

Therefore, I hold – reading de Martino against himself – that history, in this sense, is myth. Surely the need of these "crutches" (FM: 286) for those who cannot walk the path of history – intended as the superstitions and magico-religious forms that de Martino saw as bringing disruption into our presence more than helping – is questionable, and the work of gradually removing them so as to allow for more "valuable" (in de Martino's use of value, thus of more culturally and contextually effective strategies to build operativity and presence) is a positive one. What I feel is problematic in de Martino's analysis is, instead, the idea that such tools are only temporarily working, technical institutions that can be overcome when, in reality, they are the necessary ground of every action and our very presence, ever.

The grounding of operativity comes back to word, to narrative – following which layers it reaches back to poetry and myth, building blocks of meaning that also hide its arbitrariness (Watkins 1995; Detienne 1998; Van Wolde, 1999; Raveri 2010), primary concealment which allows the building of a non-built. To put it differently: the original ground is built and then this very act concealed and reversed – that which was posed becomes that which is posing (Žižek 2014: 148–9). Value – the shared and culturally translated experience, the presence of an operative, usable world – is grounded on this always reiterated founding myth, embedded and concealed, which constitutes the very possibility of the presence. That is, value is grounded on other value (culture on culture), myth which repeats itself with a difference in the event. Let's move on to understand better what "value" is.

⁵⁴ I reserve to a future publication the in-depth discussion of this topic. Here it suffices to say that others (e.g. Assmann 2011) have reflected on the interconnectedness and sometimes indiscernibility of history and myth – at least in the terms that de Martino pose: history as new, different, unique experience that may cause angst and loss of operativity, and myth as an experience which is already known, repeated and enacted by someone else.

III.2.3. *The endless valorization of presence*

We have seen how Nāgārjuna presents and uses emptiness to dispel the contradictions at the center of human existence, leading to *dukkha*. The radical crisis is thus possibly overcome through the Middle Way as a soteriological path towards liberation from appropriation of “things” which are not such, including our “selves”. But this account is far from plain and unproblematic: in fact, it appears to engender more problems – unsolvable if not through very complex and again problematic positions.

De Martino tries to cope with these core contradictions – the grasping of “things” in the stream of experience – differently. How can experiences remain, leave traces, be embodied, in a floating world? This is what de Martino asks himself, with a special focus on our first-person experience, our *presence*. This is where de Martino and Nāgārjuna are both interconnected, and part ways. Another difference lies in the problem of *what is to be human*, and de Martino has a different take on it – a pivotal idea for his whole thought:

the human condition is characterized by the resolution of what becomes in the permanence of what has value, in the dialectic of the relationship between becoming and value, between passing and making pass following a rule (FM: 400).

This means that, although everything is impermanent and constantly changing, things remain (or, are perceived as remaining) somehow, or, if impermanence is total and universal, its timing is “permanent enough” for us, for our life span and our symbolic (integral) constitution to appreciate and live as if things were stable. The passing of experience is embedded into discourse, objects, into our bodies.

De Martino’s understood history as a process of “passing over” in value what remains of the impermanence and unicity of experience, which is what builds us, the context we live in that, in its continuous of immediacy and insubstantiality, still retains something that appears solid, grounded, a base for operativity.

While emptiness means that everything is codependently arising, the idea of the valorization of experience and its embodiment implies that not only what is “synchronically” in relation, but also all that has been “passed into value” is constituting the presence. Obviously we may have different metaphysics of time – with Nāgārjuna rejecting all of them (MK: XIX) – but, regardless of our understanding of time, value can work if there is a perception of something being past or being related and somehow grounding a certain experience. In this sense, our presence is co-dependently arising with all that preceded it in value (in de Martino’s radical historicism), as well as with the whole of instantaneous reality (in Buddhist radical presentism). The experience of things through the presence is embedded into a dialectical stream in which phenomena arise: in Hegel’s perspective, “every actual thing involves a coexistence of opposed elements”.⁵⁵ De Martino goes a little further, by saying that every actual thing involves the coexistence of all other elements subsumed through valorization.

We have seen that the radical crisis develops from the tension between a reified idea of a stable reality – of consistent, continuous and coherent things – and their impermanence, leading to attachment and suffering. This point, emphasized by Buddhism, is also pivotal in

⁵⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830). Part One, IV, Second Attitude of Thought to Objectivity. Two: The Critical Philosophy, §48.

de Martino's work, albeit formulated differently. In his understanding, the problem – which is not new to Western philosophy, too – is this: how can things remain and proceed in history, changing but maintaining certain features? How can presence be assessed through change, how can all the network which builds our experience resist? His answer was, instead of a complete rejection or deconstruction *à la* Derrida, that this process works through value and its ethical imperative, the Ethos of transcendence.⁵⁶ This Ethos is the compelling drive that makes us “pass things into value”, make our presence operative in the world and, in codependence, make the world appear again and again, since the world's fragility is the same as our own.

III.1.2. *The embeddedness of the presence*

De Martino struggled with a very old, very hard philosophical problem: the subject-object relationship, the relation of the self to the world, supposing it as not only idealistically internal but at the same time not naively external. He came from a branch of idealism that evolved into his own radical historicism, and one which was militant, politically and socially active. The world could not just be an internal representation, as de Martino is quite pragmatic. But he could not just think of this being in the world as a simple given subject, whose status is unquestioned, standing before a given world, also unproblematic. For de Martino, *presence* means an unstable, always rebuilt process; this presence is rebuilt through valorization of experience in the world, which is itself the sum of all this valorization, which is value always re-made. The world itself, therefore, is unstable, it is *realtà condenda*, or, in the terms of this thesis, co-produced: presence and its valorization make the world as much as the world makes the presence (Catucci 2013: 132). In these terms, we cannot avoid what seems paradoxical, a groundless co-implication of the terms:

The very thought that I am the subject of experience is only possible through concepts, ideas, and language that are extrinsic to me. Yet these extrinsic factors are dependent on my existence. The world is within me, and I am within the world. And it is impossible to specify where one perspective ends and the other begins; they fold back upon one another seamlessly, like the two sides of a Möbius strip. (Sharf 2021: 160)

The idea that the world is as unstable (empty, codependent) as the subject became important to the late work of de Martino. While preparing the notes that would later become *La Fine del Mondo*, he confronted himself with Heidegger and found his own way out of the problem of Being-in-the-World. De Martino was heavily influenced by Heidegger in his formulation of presence, inspired by *Dasein* (a concept introduced in *Sein und Zeit*, orig. 1927). In Heidegger, *Dasein* is essentially a static notion, while for de Martino there is an intrinsic dynamism in the presence (Ferrari 2012: 47–8):

The world as a familiar, domestic, habitual, obvious, normal, customary background acts as an indication of the possible operative pathways where the millenarian human activity lies [along with] the transformations resulting from ages of traditions and, finally, the biography of the individual until the present. (FM: 331)

⁵⁶ On the topic of the Ethos there is a vast literature: see for example Berardini 2013, Catucci 2013, Calandrucio 2016, Valisano 2018.

De Martino discusses Heidegger's *in-der-Welt-sein* and compares it critically to its own take on presence (FM: 526ff). He argues that Heidegger subtracts the *sein-sollen*, meaning that the German philosopher considers all the possible worlds as emptied of being-in-the-world. In other words, Heidegger interprets the Being-in-the-World as ontological dejection, while for de Martino it means a never-ending projection towards value, to build a world that allows operativity. The inability of doing so and the feeling of dejection would mean the end of such operativity and the experience of apocalypse.

The presence, in its ungivenness, its radical crisis which is the lack of being, is not different from the world, the experience of reality. This whole co-arising is a network in which different perceived presences relate, notwithstanding possible metaphysical interpretations about other minds, etc: the phenomenological level – the level of appearance – is the one which counts, which exists and can be understood as patternhood. I will call this the *semantic network* – the network of shared valorized experience where every presence, as a pattern of personal experience which exists in the shared imagination, is embedded and is signified through. The signification (through valorization) of the presence is in no way different from the presence itself.

When the possibility of valorization falls back, threatened by the radical risk of being not able to be in any possible cultural world, then

the world of usable (of the “familiar”) is stricken by the crisis exactly because it constitutes the fundamental witness of the being-in-the-world: and here the pipe or the fork or the doorknob or the glass of beer become problems, that is, they lose their significance as cultural solutions of the usable, and open on “nothingness”. Even the instrumentality of one’s own body becomes problematic, in the sense that it loses its instrumental character for which we continuously appropriate our limbs and organs according to a cultural mimic-operative tradition that keeps being re-decided, *never starting from zero, and always adding something beyond that zero*. (FM: 391, italics in the original)

Here de Martino, borrowing from Heidegger’s terminology, refers to the usable⁵⁷ as what allows our experience to be actualized, to “transform” the world, to continue the dialectic process of history and, by extension, of the experience of presence – this presence that “together with everyone in history stays, and with everyone in history falls” (FSV: 133) and, therefore, is necessarily endowed with action and direct us towards ethics.

We have thus seen how presence is fundamentally fragile – this because it is empty, co-produced with a likewise fragile world. This presence can end, as well as the world. There is an extremely close relationship between the two, exactly because there is not a substantial thing which is one nor the other. This apparent conclusion is somehow the start of de Martino’s posthumous work, since it is by starting questioning himself about the psychopathological states that the Italian scholar came to see how our experience of the end of the world is inextricably linked to the end of the presence. Much like the shamans who went to save lost souls, so in Western institutes people experienced states in which their presence was threatened, to the point that they were not able to valorize their experience

⁵⁷ I decided to translate to the more direct version of the Italian “utilizzabile”, although the word de Martino refers to is possibly *verwendbar*, which some authors translate as “deployable”. Nonetheless, I deem this translation accurate enough (cfr. The French “utilisable”) and it expresses the meaning of de Martino’s understanding of the term.

anymore (the very definition of loss of the presence). They were sometimes in catatonic states from which they could not escape – example par excellence is the *olon* state (treated in detail in the whole second chapter of *Il mondo magico*): again, an extreme representation of the minimum definition of suffering: being imprisoned in a mental state, in an experience. Here, the inability to valorize it, to make it become value, sense, meant to be unable to express it and go out of oneself, thus seeing completely clearly how our presence is always interwoven with others, and never a given. Without familiar faces, objects, a setting and ground provided by the shared valorization, no experience makes sense. Of course the basic valorization that enables us to experience (which we may say is even more basic) still remains, but leaves the subject to its own radical crisis.

In this state, there can be experiences in which the subject feels the whole world is ending – stars fall, the sky is cracking, the earth is trembling, and everything becomes unfamiliar, distant, unwelcoming. This is what de Martino says to oppose the static givenness of the world in which Heidegger said we may be thrown: for de Martino it is even worse – this same thrownness and dejection can be removed, leaving the nothingness beneath. Nothingness is the impossibility of being present, of thinking of a world to come – it is, in a sense, pure hell: not because of its metaphysical eternity, but because of being entrapped into a state from which no exit seems possible. The embeddedness of presence generally prevents us from this state, since in front of this crisis we can rely on the embodied values to recover and re-signify our operativity.⁵⁸ But sometimes this is not enough.

The world, as well as our presence, is always under the threat of the radical crisis, which emerges by the contradiction between our desire to grasp and the impossibility of such grasping, the need to pass things into value and the possibility to do so only in a shared network of significance. This is why the end of the world and the end of the presence are so inextricably linked.

III.1.3. *The end of the world and the Ethos*

As mentioned before, in MM de Martino proposes that the “magic world” holds an immense importance for our present human condition – namely, the work done through the lives of myriads of generations built the values we live by today, and especially built *a stabile presence*. The work closes with the attempt to link this past and tragic world with the contemporary one, so to somehow explain this terrible (but in fact only apparent)⁵⁹ distance felt by modern people towards magic and superstition. This process of making of the presence, de Martino concluded, reaches its peak with modern Western civilization, where the presence is finally established.

After many years of fieldwork in the South of Italy, with the so-called Southern Trilogy (composed by *La terra del rimorso*, *Morte e pianto rituale*, and *Sud e magia*),⁶⁰ de Martino finally had the chance to see what it means to live in the conditions of a presence which is not

⁵⁸ For the idea of embodiment in studies on Ernesto de Martino, see for example Cherchi 1987: 265; Marraffa 2021.

⁵⁹ See, for example, the work of W.J. Hanegraaff (e.g. 2003) for an elaboration of the problem of disenchantment, re-enchantment, and the theorisation of the persistence of the occult into Western culture, as a countercultural but nonetheless integral part of it.

⁶⁰ See note 50.

granted. With the posthumously published FM, all his late ideas and notes were collected to form and clarify his more mature thought: the idea that presence is always, radically, intrinsically menaced and it has to be continuously rebuilt by each of us and each culture through time, producing cultural value. This production of value is the work of the transcendental ethos of transcendence, and is, for de Martino, the most basic force of human life. The only real difference with the magic world is that today we are aware of this, and we can and should be all the more:

The ethos of transcendence can know its own fundative primacy, never transcendable: and in this consciousness it becomes the explicit rule of life that becomes culture, while before it was implicit rule, not known and nonetheless working. (FM: 541)

De Martino proposes this understanding of the Ethos as a transcendence that cannot be transcended as coming from the self-understanding that the West, through history, gained of itself. De Martino perceived a tension between the “subaltern”, popular world – represented by the magical protective mechanisms that he so accurately retold in his trilogy, but especially evident in the misery and suffering of those people – and the modern, disenchanting, lay one which, in his perspective, was to rely solely on history. This tension meant, on a practical level, that the shared culture into which value is built – the semantic network – would become problematic and the presence harder to establish, or, put differently, that the radical crisis presents itself not only at individual but also at a cultural level. This is what is called the cultural apocalypse, and this is what, in de Martino’s view, is happening to the West today: the loss of cultural means to produce value (called for with Hegel’s death of art, Nietzsche’s death of God, Fukuyama’s end of history) due to the disruption of the very cultural layers constituting its ground. These layers, recognized among others to be mostly emerging from the Christian *Weltanschauung*, started their slow decay in the precise moment they appeared. In fact, for de Martino (following Hegel), Christianity is the return of the Spirit to itself, or, in the terms of radical historicism, the fact that Christianity inaugurates a historical perspective through the postponing of *parusia* (FM: 232–290). Christianity inaugurated the end of metahistory, while still being into it. This meant the self-abolition of Christianity as a cultural force, or, in other words, the end of Christianity in secularized times and therefore the end of production of value and protection against the loss of the presence (with the spread of orientalism or new forms of superstition, about which see the current debate about re-enchantment). What is needed, therefore, in de Martino’s view, is a new foundation of Ethos, now understood as the ultimate value, so as to solve the apocalyptic crisis of the globalized West:

The central problem of the world of today appears to be the foundation of a new cultural ethos no more limited to [local problems], but to the entire planet Earth that by now astronauts contemplate from the cosmic solitude, and that is becoming, through contradictions and resistances, our fundamentally united cultural homeland, with all the richness of its memories and its perspectives. In the measure in which this new ethos will be really operative and unifying, gathering in a self-aware ecumene of common values the original division and spread of people and cultures, the world that “should not” finish will be victorious against the recurring temptation of the world that “can” finish, and the

end of “a world” will not mean the end “of the world”, but, simply, “the world of tomorrow”. (FM: 75–6)

The most basic imperative of human existence, then, is not to pass on our genes or to be happy – instead, it is to make sense of it, to produce shared value which is what keeps making the presence, the shared world. If we do not do this, nothing can ever continue to sussist, nothing can be thought of, nothing would make sense, and the world would just collapse in countless personal psychopathological apocalypses, and a cultural, global apocalypse.

III.1. What is the presence?

After this dense and short review of some of de Martino’s main ideas, it is time to sum up. What is the presence, and what does all de Martino’s work entail? De Martino (1995: 103–4; translation by Ferrari 2012: 39) defines presence as the

[h]uman primordial ethos, the will of history that perpetually unfolds protected by memory and stimulated by the continuous need to always return to resolve the becoming while it becomes. As primordial ethos, presence is also exposed to the risk of a primordial guilt, that is [the risk] to fail its duty to be always present, to always renew the ‘there’ (ci) of the ‘being there’ (esserci), to rise not from situation [i.e. contingent history] in a voluntary way but to reiterate it, thus becoming its prisoner.

So presence is not granted, not given once for all but always rebuilt. Presence, in fact, rests on its own effort of being continuously rebuilt and reaffirmed, where “its own” refers to the actual semantic network which defies the distinction between subject and object. Presence is built on becoming (Ferrari 2012: 39), which is what subtracts it from substantiality and makes it close to Buddhist perspectives. The experiential center is relational, provisional, fictional – in other words, empty – and it stands in front of (better, into, as a part of) change and impermanence. The understanding of presence as empty and embedded into *pratītyasamutpāda* (the semantic network) is determining it as a heuristic, functional fiction, thus not as a “something” but a mere linguistic designation, a hermeneutic artifact that nonetheless applies to what we consider to be our experience, and it does so exactly in virtue of the fact that all of reality is embedded into this semantic network.

To elaborate this further, we can say that

[p]resence is the individual volitional center, a site located beyond the laws of chemistry and biology. In other words, presence is the way to develop all distinct operative powers that contribute to the formation of the human being (Ferrari 2012: 48)

This said, since the presence arises in co-dependence with the world, this volitional center cannot but being contextually coproduced and, therefore, follow some patterns that evolve dialectically through valorization. Presence is not an identity, not a substantial core; instead “presence – with all its affirmations and negations (and contradictions) – objectifies history by making it a ductile function of the individual and the collectivity” (Ibid: 34). Put otherwise, presence is the value which contextually adapt itself, the experience which becomes history and displays how what is generally thought of as the “individual” necessarily

becomes usable in the moment it is understood and further valorized, thus never really falling into the dualism of subject-object. Every valorized (that is, at minimum, understood) experience is historical and, therefore, embedded into the semantic network.

According to de Martino, the “ultimate risk of personhood” is generated by the impotence of assessing one’s presence in the world:

“The human person exists and survives insofar as it affirms itself as a center of decision and choice according to forms of cultural coherence”: so that a state of “psychological misery” (we would say, existential misery, radical crisis) is characterized as the “radical impotence to emerge as an operator from certain existential situations, and to cross such situations with adequate responses endowed with values” (de Martino 1975: 147)

As this and other quotes show, a problem arising from de Martino’s radical historicism and integral humanism is human-centeredness (not to say Western-centeredness). In this thesis I am implicitly correcting this problem, but it should be nevertheless noted. De Martino sees, in fact, nature as something that has to pass into culture, albeit his understanding of this statement is to be clarified: nature is the “raw” in the sense of experience *experienced as a given* – nature being not given at all, in fact, but understood always through the lenses of value. In this sense, there is no raw, no natural, no original. This said, it may be important to prevent this position from becoming supportive of appropriative, disruptive forms of capitalism – which de Martino fought – and human exclusivism: “The same dualism that reduces things to objects for consciousness is at work in the humanism that reduces nature to raw material for mankind” (Zimmerman 1983: 112). Presence is instead understood as a middle way, as much as emptiness is not understood as mere negativity. Presence is the simple appearance of experience, the basic layer on which reality unfolds dialectically, enabling action. Thus presence is not the opposite of absence *stricto sensu*, rather that which is to actively participate in the semantic network.

Presence entails the radical crisis, but also is the only way and starting point to overcome it. Without presence, there can be no liberation from the crisis; but, presence being not the self, it can be useful to describe the experience of liberated beings, too, and in general to refer to any experience which needs not be substantial to exist. I will elaborate on this further: for now it will suffice to say that a presence can be experienced without an attachment to a self believed to be substantial.

This understanding – presence as empty – does not mean that the crisis of the presence, the constant apocalyptic threat, disappears; once again, the crisis is constitutive of our very Being-in-the-World:

As humanity’s distinct feature, presence is guaranteed by individual and social patterns, but at the same time it is constantly under threat. Its fragility is due to its intrinsic capacity to be dynamic and to be subject to moments of crisis. (Ferrari 2012: 48)

We can heuristically distinguish two moments: “(i) the affirmation of presence through an existential crisis, a moment signified by rites of passage (birth, marriage, death, etc.) or their lack; (ii) the loss of presence and the transformation of the subject ‘I’ into an object (‘me’)” (Ibid: 35). In this sense, there is an appropriation of the first-person phenomenal experience, but this is not something done by a subject with respect to an object: it is the same presence

which comes back to itself, which arises in codependence with an equally codependently arising “world” – itself presence.

The presence is thus what should not end, what the Ethos prescribes to continuously valorize, to make appear (or, codependently arise) in a Middle Way, neither eternalist nor nihilist. Presence is empty, but not nothingness, and the loss of the presence is the loss of the world. In de Martino’s words, the end of the presence is

[n]ot just the positive sense of non-being which stimulates every being-for-value, every concrete effort of presentification, rather the non-being of value which transforms into a blind stimuli of itself and strikes the core of valorization, that is, the world – culturally determined and determinable – of utilization, which at the very limit leaves no margin for an utilizable world in which to be present. The opening on nothingness by projectable objects and projecting operations is the annihilation of presentification. (FM: 392).

In this passage, de Martino clarifies the difference between the appropriation of things for operative goals – that which even a liberated being, i.e. a Buddha, has to do so as to perform (or appear to perform, given that distinction holds) any action – and the appropriation which is detrimental to our very experience, our presence.

What de Martino calls the “positive sense of non-being which stimulates every being-for-value” can be equated, in my interpretation, with *anattā*: the empty core usually understood as the self is a non-being, but a positive one because it drives the valorization, the very existence of things, much like the *pratītyasamutpāda* (or semantic network) exists only through the emptiness of all things. One’s presence can be valorized exactly because it is empty, which is the driving force that makes the presence being continuously rebuilt.

Presence is, therefore, the culturally and historically embedded first-person phenomenal experience, as an operative functional fiction – there is no substantial self, and not even just a process⁶¹: rather, a lack of being which is always re-constituted through the “effort of valorization”, the passing of nature (pure experience) into value (culture, shared meaning built on the semantic network). The presence is built on this historical (itself understood as fundamentally mythic-ritual) reiteration of an impossible identity, *différance* which reproduces what is not given and not self-identical, but is rhetorically believed as such so as to act in the world, itself reproduced as such and, therefore, something of which we can say that it is present and (co-)allows reality to be present.

⁶¹ A processual view of the self is the one endorsed by neuroscientists such as Metzinger: “A self, then, would simply be a self-organizing and self-sustaining physical system that can represent itself on the level of global availability. The self is not a thing but a process” (Metzinger 2009: 208).

The Solution – Soteriology

So far we have seen how, from two completely different contexts and with two different proposals, Nāgārjuna and de Martino came to similar conclusions, asking for similar things. They both – in very different terms, and of course only under the light of the hermeneutical exercise that we are doing here – perceived the need of a soteriology, of a way out from suffering (Nāgārjuna in a clear sense, de Martino as a “civil religion”, a lay enterprise to liberate mankind from its always threatening fear of not being there). They both felt the need to think of how to be in the world and at the same time escape from its intrinsic crisis. They both thought that a radical revision of what we are is necessary to think of soteriology and ethics – how to overcome the crisis and how to act correctly.

This revision of our own self perception implies a radical change of perspective about naive, commonsensical, often undisputed groundings and basic beliefs, with the result of bringing them both to see the “individual” presence as embedded into a semantic network that signifies – with its conventional values, which are unsubstantial, always rebuilt, and never ultimately given – existence. The intrinsic crisis of existence is therefore transcended through a deep understanding of such ungrounded insubstantiality and of its conventional value, in which nothing stands but that still asks for coherent and context-based ethics.

These are, in quite an abstract and general way, the commonalities between the two. The specific ways they propose with regard to soteriology then split according to the systems of thought they work on – the “eliminative” one for Nāgārjuna, and the “dialectic” one for de Martino, so to speak. The first focuses on rejecting all positions in order to evacuate thought and the contradictions and traps of dialectics (which implies grasping, not only at an intellectual but also ontological and existential levels), so as to overcome the crisis by removing its own root, pointing to quietism. The second focuses on maintaining the presence, always exposed to the risk of being lost, identified as both the center of the valorization and the matrix of the crisis, and therefore embraces a never-ending, dialectical method which entails value production and allows for ethical action. The pros and cons of both sides have been previously discussed, but some points still remain unsolved. In what follows I will highlight some of the main knots in this dialogue, and eventually try to untie them. Here are four problems – among the many – that, although belonging primarily to one or another author, I would like to discuss bearing in mind all the work done until here, reading them through the lenses of this comparison.

IV.1. Some questions

So far we have seen how Nāgārjuna and de Martino elaborate the solution for what they present as the problem of human existence – the radical crisis, which has been discussed and analyzed at length and in different ways. These solutions, as I tried to show, imply a redefinition of our operative understanding of subject and object, personal experience and perception of reality at large. Still, some more problems, and not minor ones, remain. The four not-so-easy questions to be answered are the following:

1. How can emptiness be built?

2. How can empty ethics be proposed?
3. How can presence be experienced?
4. How can dialectics and emptiness relate?

In order to provide satisfactory answers, I will try to put forth a comprehensive theoretical account of what has been said up to now, before heading to conclusion.

IV.1.1. *How can emptiness be built?*

We have seen how Buddhism – in some of its forms – calls for reality “as it is”, devoid of all grasping. But is there such a thing? Reality as it is is a very problematic concept, which has been criticized by philosophers on many occasions. In Western philosophy, Kant drew a distinction between noumenon and phenomenon, with the former – reality in itself – being inaccessible, since all appears through our senses and their being processed (as neo-kantian currents, implementing also scientific advances, propose). Hegel went further, positing reality as a dialectical process in which there is no thing in itself – something that can come extremely close to Nāgārjuna and which is one of the main influences on de Martino. Derrida, working on Hegel and looking critically, with his deconstructionist gaze, at the history of Western metaphysics, showed how every assumption is based on another in an infinite deconstruction which leads to the absence of grounding – the non-original originality, the building of a ground that is never given.

Buddhism knows this, too. In fact, Nāgārjuna is well aware of the emptiness of emptiness, as we have already pointed out: but then, how can we talk of any *tathatā*, reality as it is? How can we talk of the Buddha, nirvana, samsara, *dukkha*, and anything at all? All is conventional: what brings this specific discourse on, what gives it authority? A simple answer could be: the worldly reasons, the conventional, where certain rules apply. Which is not incorrect, but not sufficient, either. If everything is based on something, and the origin is never original, being in fact groundless and empty, then also codependent origination “is nothing other than the nonoriginal origin that erases absolute originality”.⁶²

Now, if the original, structural nescience (*avidyā*) is ignorance of the true nature of things, mostly based on *a priori* opinions given for granted (Murti 1983: 172), a “false knowledge” of which we are not aware (Bugault 1994: 125) – thus, salvific knowledge is to realize this state, by analyzing and deconstructing our understanding and cognition. But if there is no “true nature of things”, knowledge cannot reach its base, its origin. Knowledge can only keep reinforcing bias and provide beliefs about our experience of a never-original reality.

On the other hand, the process of knowledge could be characterized as subtractive – again, much like negative theology – and, in this sense, this knowledge comes when thought is extinguished (Magno 2016: 248). Knowledge has to be intended as built in historiographical layers, to be digged archaeologically and deconstructed, as authors such as Foucault and Derrida have shown. Such knowledge is based on arbitrary moves that structured our present through the valorization of experience. Again, we cannot escape the interrelatedness of things in the semantic network:

⁶² M.C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984, p. 118.

Human culture and language, like the physical world, existed before I arrived on the scene and will continue after I have gone. Anything I think—indeed, that I think anything at all—is possible only through the epistemic scaffolding afforded by semiotic systems that are extrinsic to me. (Sharf 2021b: 152)

The world, as well as the presence – what we have seen being a semantic network – preexists our experience, but is remade actual in every valorization which brings forth the presence. To know means, apparently, to reimagine our shared beliefs, renouncing – if not on another level of the fiction – to the meta-level, using metahistory but knowing that we can never transcend history. The whole of our experience is made possible by epistemic conditioning and the construction of reality as *natural*, when it is instead constructed and “naturalized” in a process of valorization so deep to be forgotten (Squarcini 2016).

This subtractive, deconstructive knowledge may lead to the very heart of the soteriology – as much as Nāgārjuna’s radical critique accepts the emptiness of Buddha, the whole path, and all things, nirvana, samsara and emptiness included. Only thus the Way can exist – and the intellectual speculation, of which Nāgārjuna is a master, can become the end of the intellectual speculation, in a self-transcendent move in which nothing is actually transcendent, but also it is:

There is nothing to be attained, and when you see this, you have attained something, both conventionally and ultimately. Everything is left precisely as it was before, and everything has changed, both conventionally and ultimately (Sharf 2021a: 103)

To put it shortly: emptiness as a device, liberation as a path, suffering itself, all these things are conventional and built, non-original, and there is nothing they may lead to if not in a dialectical, persuasive process which builds them (as non-built). We may in the end come to the paradoxical conclusion that, since nirvana and samsara are not different (in one construction of the problem!), everything is already potentially endowed with Buddhahood, and therefore it may seem one has to get free from nirvana itself – what, in Dogen’s elaboration, becomes a mere change in perspective:

We are bound by life in birth and death and therefore it is real; it is the condition of our existence. But freedom from birth and death consists not in escaping that bondage, but rather in realizing the illusory character of the bonds. Liberation consists in the recognition that we are already liberated, and because there is no bondage, there is no liberation (Garfield & Priest 2021: 107-8)

To propose emptiness is to propose something significant which produces a change in our patterns of behavior and some form of noetic insight (more on this later). The status of emptiness is empty; this does not mean that it is not conventionally – which, once again, means on a level in which appearances are real enough, but where naive realism has been superseded (Westerhoff 2020: 305) – real and operative. Its persuasive power is based on worldly means, namely *upāya*, skillful means understood as empty but useful towards the goal of overcoming (what has been built as) dukkha. We can still have discussions about “truth” in the sense of conventionally useful discourses: “Intersubjective truths that hold relative to a sufficiently large body of subjects seem to be a reasonable substitute for objective truths” (Ibid: 307).

By this I intend that beliefs are continuously co-produced by the valorization of patterns by each presence in the semantic network. The “non-original origin” of each belief is concealed in its arising, as well as the valorization of presence is concealed but shows itself in the presence. The higher persuasion of certain beliefs depends on contextual, skillful means:

The value of the teaching of enlightened beings can be understood without interpreting them as true in a correspondence-theoretic sense [...] Some more skillful, more illuminating constructions might just be better in bringing us to see that no construction is ultimately true. That is the nature of *upāya* (Garfield, Westerhoff 2011: 367).

Once the soteriological strategy of emptiness has been explained, the question of how to bring it forth, and who can do so, remains. This question, linking emptiness and presence, was discussed above. But what is this experience of the presence?

IV.1.3. *How can presence be experienced?*

We have seen how emptiness tries to remove our tendency to grasp things, as well as ourselves. But if there are no selves, how can there be such attempts to grasp? An experience on which building the critique is necessary, at least as apparent – and appearance is all we have, albeit not a naive realist one. This phenomenal first-person experience is what has been usefully described through de Martino’s formulation of the presence. The presence problematized the Buddhist no-self doctrine, but it is sensitive to embodiment and other theorization: in fact,

some theorists, influenced by Indian and Buddhist philosophies, argue that there is no self [...] This is a view that challenges the view of self as embodied [...] as well as views that emphasize the self as a socially and narratively constituted entity (Gallagher 2011: 8),

while de Martino acknowledges the need of our embodied and social (historical) experience. The presence is therefore nothing else than our phenomenal first-person experience, which has nonetheless to be intended as a co-produced state which works together with the experience of reality itself. The presence is embedded into history in the sense of the whole of valorized experiences which shape our cognition, which

is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs. (Varela et al. 1992: 9).

This “enactment”, itself a non-original originality, an identity through difference, an impossible and absolutely contradictory self-identity – as it has been labeled by different authors quoted – implies the position of identity through value, every time remade and perceived as continuous through valorization, which is the contextual and shared construction of meaning about the experience (thus about the presence itself). In other words: the presence is experienced (as experiencing) and what it is valorized of the experience becomes what makes the presence arise, and this can only happen in codependency. The presence can be seen as a “vanishing mediator”, always retroactively removing its previous representations, thus existing through its absence.

As for the problem of how to experience, and what is experienced, once liberation has been attained – once everything has been appraised as empty, subject-object and any other dichotomy and dualism overcome – may be well beyond the grasp of theoretical speculation, which is possibly a good thing. The advances in neuroscience and cognitive studies, united with cooperation between practitioners and scholars, may disclose a better understanding about this question and possibly give us a new perspective on how to experience reality:

the contribution cognitive neuroscience finally makes to the philosophical projects of humanity will be a significant one, because, at its core, cognitive neuroscience is the project of self-knowledge. (Metzinger 2003: 632)

But to come back to Dogen, we may say that “Self-realization – or rather, realization of one’s non-self – must be based on, and grounded in, everyday, practical” (Dogen 1988: 17). The problem of presence (in its emptiness), therefore, discloses another one, that of ethics.

IV.1.2. *How can empty ethics be proposed?*

Emptiness gives way to an array of problems, as we have seen; but the most urgent, given the soteriological and ethical goal of this path, is exactly ethical: can we act, after all? Even if the answer is “yes”, the next will be: can we act correctly, if we cannot see any preference in how things are, if there is no way to found a ground, if there is no way to confute the other and condemn evil deeds, if not by being condemned to silence and quietism?⁶³ How can one point denounce crimes and abuses in the world if any discourse is inconsistent (therefore, no one holds better than others, and the most radical refusal cannot but state its own powerlessness)? The ethical questions, which are fundamental in today’s world, and even more in front of the radical crisis which threatens our world – our perceived, imagined, shared world – need to be addressed clearly. First of all, what is ethics?

At the heart of ethics are two questions: (1) What should I do?, and (2) What sort of person should I be? Though philosophers sometimes proceed as if these questions were really quite distinct from one another, it is artificial to suppose that we can plausibly answer the one without making important commitments that go some ways towards answering the other. (Shafer-Landau 2012: xi)

The take on who we are (and only *after*, in de Martino’s words, on the fact that we are) is in a relation of co-dependency with the question of how to act. Therefore, we can say that the core of ethics needs an understanding of ourselves so as to act, and vice versa. Both Nāgārjuna and De Martino work in this way. Nāgārjuna’s rejection of all views, and therefore universal emptiness, seems to imply no grounding, and therefore no base for any belief and any ethics – if not provisional. De Martino’s ideas about presence and valorization go in a different

⁶³ Tanaka (2021: 89) maintains that “To be a consistent global error theorist [i.e. to refuse every position] is to be a quietist”. See also Tillemans 2016. With quietism here is meant a behaviour and interaction with worldly things which is of utter detachment and, therefore, does not intervene. Since there are no possible reliable, grounded positions, everything is empty and a stable ethics, therefore a commitment (which would be attachment), seems impossible. By seeing things in this enlightened way, the problem, to those who still perceive and experience reality in a dual way, is that the many problems of the world are left to themselves; quietism becomes *laissez-faire*, or at least this is what is feared. It is an important problem which is tackled by contemporary discussions in Madhyamaka ethics.

direction: for him, we are this endless, relational process of valorization, for which our being in the world is given through others, always, but without necessarily removing a possible grounding – in fact, this very presence is what implies an ethic, the Ethos of valorization, the need to valorize (and care for) the experience, which is not only mine. In Buddhist terms, “there is no philosophical basis for simply locating the object of compassion or care within the boundaries of individual beings” (Clark 2008: 12).

Buddhist ethics, and in this case Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka ethics, imply the acceptance of such “inter-being”, of presence as embedded in a network of relationships which cannot just be theoretically appraised, but that, if deeply understood, imply an ethical direction (Magno 2002: 352–3). This ethics are embedded into our cognition, in the fact that, whatever we think about our presence, we act understanding whatever we experience and how to relate contextually to situations:

The greatest ability of living cognition, however, consists in being able to pose, within broad constraints, the relevant issues that need to be addressed at each moment. These issues and concerns are not pre-given but are enacted from a background of action, where what counts as relevant is contextually determined by our common sense. (Varela et al. 1993: 145)

It will never be stressed out enough, then, that Buddhist soteriology has a practical goal. Even if we may find it problematic, it nonetheless holds a meaningful intention. The goal being to overcome dukkha by saying that we cannot grasp ourselves nor the things of an apparently dualistic world, that is, the whole build-as-non-built reality which works as a framework for soteriology, is still perfectly available and, in fact, much more persuasive than many other sets of beliefs, since even other beliefs can be characterized as such, in which case we would see their conventionality and, moreover, their lack of honesty in self-abolishing themselves. To come back to practice, let’s remind that

[t]he outcome of the Middle Way is to be found, then, in practice, in the integral ethical dimension of human beings, which includes and perfects every theoretical attitude, too. (Magno 2012: 256)

Ethics are based on contextual, built values, always reproduced in a sort of “cycle of beliefs” – persuasive, shared beliefs are embodied, experienced as real, and their reality keeps being valorized through contextual change. Thus, emptiness and no grounding do not entail accepting everything.

The opening to everything (the one which, in de Martino’s quote in the opening of this thesis, threatens to bring us into nothingness) also menaces the personal choices and commitment – the very presence, since if one does not know who to be will not know what to do, what to choose, etc. Thus it may seem acceptable to enjoy “each other for properties that make sense to each other and in the same sorts of ways” (Delaney 2022: 126). This way of being satisfied with engaging in activities with who likes to do what we also like may appear in opposition with an opening to every other position and, also, enhancing the self with its recursive building mechanisms; but isn’t it so that we cooperate and bring forth new value? Surely, this each other has to be understood as empty, codependent presences which are actually not distinguished, but can nonetheless relate on a pattern level. This recognition of properties –

patterns – in others who are not such will be further elaborated.

The question of how can someone not committed to a “self” have consistent ethics is debated among scholars. Williams (1998) implies that the no-self view means no normativity, while Arnolds (2018) proposes that exactly viewing reality as co-dependent and conventional means that this experience is all we have, thus there is an impellent commitment. Buddhism is relational and social; there is no metaphysical escape nor metalanguage, thus no logic of either/or, no dialectic of duality: only immanent relationality – thus the removal of identity, of self-centered understanding of the world, may help to avoid “ontologies of identity and difference, epistemologies of privilege and elitism, socio-political hierarchy and escapist, irresponsible reclusivism” (Berger 2021: 119). Lacan, in Slavoj Žižek’s reading, proposes that we remove any reference for ethics: “renouncing the guarantee of some big Other is the very condition of a truly autonomous ethics” (Žižek 2006: 331) – where the big Other is the guarantee, the grounding, the metaphysical sustenance of reality. In Buddhist terms, the universal emptiness; in de Martino’s term, the metahistorical plane. Exactly this immanence, this conventionality without big Other is what compels us to act.

So in conclusion: ethics are contextual (Finnigan 2018) and the Buddha insight *may* very well be impermanent and relational too – empty, that is – but we can count it as “universal” inasmuch as we humans are concerned with our cognitive and embodied perception of pain and individualized perception that implies suffering (Metzinger 2016). Thus ethics are not grounded, are always contextual, but not completely randomized – which, again, will mean to misunderstand emptiness: the “groundings” are provided by the context, the infinite, bottomless foundation of things in co-dependency; thus in the context we see *dukkha*, the radical crisis, present, and consequently we can have ethics – which again need just enough theory, and mostly practice: in fact, “most of the traditional Mahayana presentations do not begin with groundlessness but rather with the cultivation of compassion for all sentient beings” (Varela et al., 1991: 248). In two texts attributed to Nāgārjuna, the *Ratnavali* and the *Suḥr̥llekha*, we find practical instructions that complete the theoretical outline of Madhyamaka Buddhism in his major works. We have to imagine Nāgārjuna as a monk who lived and practiced in a specific, contextual, ethically driven way, even if (or, exactly because) aware of the conventional value of such actions.

Therefore action is not only possible, but necessary (Garfield & Samten 2006: 13-16); it can even be argued that “only in an empty world is morality understood to be not only a necessary, but even a constitutional force” (Shulman 2009: 162). What remains, then, is to decide what is good, and what is not. This can be problematic, since discourse is to be evacuated and dualistic understanding of things removed – and how can someone decide what is good for others, both being fictional?

A short and possible answer would be to try to gather data and consensus from the actual (conventional) knowledge we have about the natural world through scientific means. We may be able to discriminate between forms of suffering, internal states, and so be able to assess better ethical judgements based on “hard” beliefs. For example, if all sentient beings have a level of awareness that qualifies them as sentient and, consequently, as having a relative welfare (Reber et al., 2022), we may nonetheless find that not all of the living and sentient identify with an internal representation, viz. the minimum definition of self and, therefore, the

requirement to be entrenched in *dukkha*. This whole understanding can be possibly applied to intelligent machines as well (Bostrom 2014) – given that they will be able to think and perceive as we, or as other sentient beings, do, in their own way but still possibly meeting the minimum definition of suffering. If an intelligent IA, or robot in its specific embodiment, perceives its internal states as its own and whole experience of the world, it may very well experience what we called the radical crisis. Nonetheless, “enlightened machines” may also be crafted, leading to completely different scenarios; but of course here we move on to a field that is utterly speculative.⁶⁴ Be as it may, humans and animals are for sure in this condition, with the former also able to act against the radical crisis, and this is already a ground for ethical decision.

So, there is no grounding, but no action is impossible, either. In Buddhist soteriology, we should act so as to overcome *dukkha*. *Dhukka*, the radical crisis, is produced by the tension between our deep-rooted desire and its failure. This can be usefully retraced as centered in the self as cognitive and operative core, but itself absent. This absence needs to be built as such, since its removal may cause only more *dukkha* – it is in fact the problem itself. The presence persists as a necessary human and cognitive feature and is the minimum of conscious life.

Presence redefines it as an operative center which is not substantial but co-produced in a semantic network, distinguishable through patterns (informative categories) developed in language through metaphors (working on different cognitive levels) and embodied through persuasive beliefs (which are maintained along time through rhetoric concealment of identity and adapted; in Buddhism, their emptiness is justified by *upāyas*, ethically context-based beliefs based on conventional sets of propositions). Presence becomes therefore the *upāya* or belief understood as empty that works to justify the conventional presentation of personal sense and persistence of perception, which enables ethical actions and dialectical interaction with the world, giving way to a *non-attached engagement* (Clark 2008: 13).

Even accepting that empty ethics can work on *upāyas*, how are we to produce them without discourse and dialectics?

IV.1.4. *How can dialectics and emptiness relate?*

The very fact that Buddhism raises questions, which are discussed since centuries inside and now more and more outside Buddhism, shows how dialectical processes take place in relation to emptiness, notwithstanding (one may say, exactly because) the emptiness of things. Buddhist schools and interpreters keep rethinking about these topics. How can one obtain nirvana, if no action whatsoever – not even Buddhist practice – can lead to it (Sharf 2021a: 86)? How do duality and nonduality relate? What is the status of the two truths, and how can we ascertain their value?

If Buddhist teachings are empty too, how can they work? Nāgārjuna’s reply is that the question misunderstands emptiness with non-existence; but if this is the case, and the path, the Buddha, and all things are empty and only so they exist, isn’t this contradicting the idea that

⁶⁴ Although the problem of new technologies, IA, and our relationship to them has not been overlooked by Buddhism: see, for example, and for different takes on the topic, Huges 2012, 2019; Grela 2019; Doctor 2020; Hongladarom 2020; Gould & Waters 2020; Miccoli 2021; Hershock 2021.

dukkha is caused by grasping, by believing things substantial when they are not? If suffering is generated by this false attachment, but things are empty, how can there be such attachment? The problem seems solved by saying that we simply do not know that this is the situation. When we know, we realize there was nothing to grasp in the first place, and we are free – or, we actualize our Buddhahood, which had always been there. This being the case, again, we are at an impasse: how is it that we did not see? This entails the two truths problem, which in turn resolves with the emptiness and non-grounding of ultimate truth. And so on.

It is quite obvious, then, that dialectics is necessary for emptiness: emptiness rejects every proposition emerging from dialectics, but dialectics shows how emptiness cannot exist in a vacuum, thus confirming once again emptiness' emptiness. Endorsing the San Lun School intuition, emptiness is a never-ending dialectical process:

we cannot escape from the endless process as long as we still conceive of the nature of reality through language. And every finite step of the hierarchy is verbal and conceptual, so, only when this hierarchy is an infinite series can it transcend duality at its limit point (Deguchi 2021: 70)

If Nāgārjuna's critique really rejects every position, every thesis in the sense of posing something (relatively to which an antithesis can be opposed, plus the “both” and “neither-nor” positions), it should be outside of every dialectical process:

Ultimate truth, then, remains to be experienced only where conceptual dichotomies disappear, and with them every discursive ground to the poles of self and other, subject and object, relative and absolute, being and nothing. This, and nothing else, then, seems to be the “Middle Way” (Magno 2012: 15).

As this very reasoning shows, anyway, to transcend dichotomies one has to somewhat endorse them so as to reject them; as the last sentence makes clear, “this, and nothing else” is the thing we are pointing towards – something emerges on the background of something else, things are indicated, designated, acknowledged. Language may be the limit on which this inexpressible fails – a topic dear to philosophy and religion. But this may also bring us to something useful: in fact, dialectics have more than once been related to soteriology. Gregorius of Nyssa, in his *Life of Moses* (v. 239), says that

This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied (Gregorius of Nyssa 1978: 116)

This excerpt, considered apart from its theological implications, shows how anagogy – the tension towards the soteriological goal – is dialectical, never complete, and, in a sense, creative: the dialectical tension, being irresolvable, cannot but generate a continuous strive for ethical goodness. Even Buddhism, instead of quietism, cannot but logically fall into this dialectical movement (as the Bodhisattva figure clearly shows, arhat-like liberation being impossible given the absence of selves to liberate), where the path becomes a continuous perfecting and the good is attained and always impossible.

This is what constitutes the presence, in de Martino's terms, since it is never given and complete, but always in the making, a fact as problematic as necessary:

Human history encloses a momentum of inexhaustible angst exactly because it is never completely humanizable in the sense of a suppression of all its contradictions, of its negative elements (FM: 262–3),

contradictions which in turn are constitutive of reality and of presence itself: “far from being a story of [the] progressive overcoming [of antagonism], dialectics is for Hegel a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts (Žižek 1989: 6). Thus soteriology is dialectical only inasmuch as the crisis is: “The crisis is dialectical since it is a negative moment, a suffering, but also an opportunity, that is, the chance for a positive action, for a rebirth” (Berardini 2013: 384).

The dialectical process is, in Hegelian terms, exactly what enables reality to exist and what allows for the building of a non-built, or, in other words, of the Origin:

This, then, is the dialectical process: an inconsistent mess (first phase, the starting point) which is negated and, through negation, the Origin is projected or posited backwards, so that a tension is created between the present and the lost Origin (second phase). In the third phase, the Origin is perceived as inaccessible, relativized—we are in external reflection, that is, our reflection is external to the posited Origin which is experienced as a transcendent presupposition. In the fourth phase of absolute reflection, our external reflexive movement is transposed back into the Origin itself, as its own self-withdrawal or decentering. (Žižek 2014: 149)

The original ignorance is the concealment, the removed absolute, always postponed grounding and goal: our ignorance that co-produces *dukkha* is also what makes us live, since the empty goal we strive for gives us transcendental, anagogical tension – as well as dissatisfaction when misunderstood, since it is ungraspable in itself (being empty). This original ignorance, as well as the final liberation goal, can only be valorized and spelt out through a continuous process of posing its own premises that dialectics make through a cycle of embodied beliefs co-produced into a semantic network.

Language, therefore, is necessarily a source of imaginal *phantasmata* (Bottici 2014; Hanegraaff 2022), that is, a product of our imagination that reshapes the communication of the real – whatever it is – being at the same time deceived and endowed with revelation. To put it simply, language necessarily deceives us (if we take it on the background of a real and substantial world) but this deceiving is the only thing we have. There is no *true understanding*, which does not mean there is *no understanding*. If everything is empty, this does not mean that it is meaningless: rather, it is exactly as meaningful as it can and should be (see MK XXIV: 14). The construction of emptiness, its concealed grounding and its revealing power are (imagined and communicated by me as) identical and different, indistinguishable, and beyond discourse.

If truth can never be ascertained – everything being a belief, even in the eventuality that there were a substantial, truth-infused, knowable and perfectly coherent world, because one can always hold a different opinion and be convinced of it – then in the end the pragmatic question becomes: what do we do with all this discussing and babbling and thinking

(*prapañca*, intellectual proliferation)? I would suggest, following W.J. Hanegraaff, that we may in the end obtain some “noetic insight” (2022: 367). Even if things are empty and truth never to be found, this does not mean that we should give up our intellectual and practical activity: we are building value through this process, and the very thought of the unfathomability of reality is giving us this noetic insight: something changes, at least potentially, in our understanding – just the fact that ones “understands” that there is nothing to be understood is such an insight. To borrow the example from Hanegraaff’s book, the quite extraordinary and significative encounter of the part century between Derrida and Habermas – the former preventing the dialogue by saying that every proposition is essentially an imposition, and deconstructing the discourse through suspect, while the latter maintained a need to accept the other’s account: this failed encounter shows how, even if one argues for the absence of communication and understanding, still by replying one is expecting to understand something, and be to be understood. Derrida’s suspicion implied, in the end, a need to accept some basic shares of reality, on which to build his deconstruction. The idea that reality may be empty, groundless, and therefore potentially at the mercy of the most powerful discourse, does not disqualify any discourse from its potential meaning, from its very real everyday effectiveness and operative power.

Once again, exactly as negative theology does, and Buddhism and Western philosophy too – Nāgārjuna and de Martino being quite the talkers –, all this communication could be seen as directed towards an imaginal, and real enough, building of an efficacious soteriology, whose fruits are in fact here to be taken.

IV.3. A tentative proposal for a robust soteriology

Before providing answers to the previous questions, I would try to formulate a comprehensive, useful and robust theoretical framework in which inscribe the soteriology I have been discussed all along – namely, a Buddhist path which confronts itself with Western thought, especially with Ernesto de Martino’s precious insights and questions about how to act, how to be in the world, and how to avoid certain verges of thought and being that are often present in Buddhism. To present such a robust account, I will ask the aid of three authors – all of which can further the precious contribution of de Martino, who remains here the main counterpart of Nāgārjuna – whose work, I maintain, has much to say about the problems emerged in this thesis, especially subjectivity, epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics. Far from trying to harmonize their views, I will merely use them to dig deeper into the problems of this thesis. Given the limited extent of this work, the following is more of a sketch of future research and a direction of possible inquiries.

IV.3.2. *Dennett: informative patterns*

How do we address the things we talk about, the phenomena of consciousness, about which we have no direct nor real knowledge and that are to be experienced without epistemic certainty, given Nāgārjuna’s rejection of every position? How do we talk about a world that cannot ever be determined since every discourse has to be rejected, while at the same time action is necessary? How to find a way to communicate without falling prey of substantialist

mistakes, while at the same time being able to avoid quietism and bring forth ethically strong, functional and operative understanding of things? I maintain that Dennett's mild-realism can help us with this.

Daniel Dennett is an important figure in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive studies. His theories are still discussed and open to debate, but nonetheless influential. One point which I deem extremely useful to explain some problematic points of Buddhism, as well as any other account of reality, is the idea of *patterns*: informative "packs" or layers that are what is actually conveyed and understood in our everyday experience, without any actual need for them to be substantially real.

This mild-realism, as it is called, implies that, the world being empty, co-dependent, and without actual objects nor subjects, it can still be usefully understood and action is possible in it, since when one refers to "the Buddha", "the Path", or "presence", it can be understood what we refer to.

"A pattern exists in some data – is real – if there is a description of the data that is more efficient than the bit map, whether or not anyone can concoct it." (Dennett 1991: 34). This means that a pattern is a compression of information – which is transmitted more efficiently, instead that through a bit map (a one-to-one map) – that is in principle intelligible by some observer, but not all, since there can be pattern recognition in different forms. Furthermore, patterns are present given the above definition, but they are real only if they produce predictive power. This means that they are not real if they are given by chance, like the pattern of obtaining ten times six from throwing a dice (Aames 2019: 7).

Since patterns are to be discerned differently by different observers, this means that they are dependent and to be seen they need some form of intentionality – what Dennett calls the "intentional stance" (Dennett 1987: 17). Intentionality here refers to being moved for our actions by desires, beliefs, etc. Therefore, patterns are observer-dependent, as well as independent in their being not controlled by the gaze that sees them – like any other thing in the world, they retain some agency, exactly because they are co-dependent and therefore exist in dependence to other agents, which also do so, without losing their ability to act.

Thus, also the observer is pattern-dependent, since the very presence of the "subject" is co-produced with the pattern (which defines the recognizability of the cognizant, structures the world around it, and is structured, too). The presence is thus a pattern which emerges by constantly discerning patterns which are intelligible to a specific contextual "patternhood".

Patterns, also, are characterized by multiple instantiability (Aames 2019: 8–9): a musical piece can be recognized as such independently on the fact that it is produced live or on a device, with lower or higher octave, etc. (even if these changes give rise to different levels of patterns, such as the pattern of being live / studio music, etc.). The problem of the Ship of Theseus, here, is solved: even if we change all parts, the whole remains – the pattern of the ship being recognizable.⁶⁵ The same holds for the subject: even if I am an instantaneous stream of dhammas, still I can be recognized as a pattern. Even if the world is boiled down to

⁶⁵ This problem is well known in Buddhism: see the example of the wheel and the cart in the *Milindapanha*, where the monk Milinda answers to the King about the problem of identity and its unity, understood and indicated as a pattern but inconsistent as substance.

quantum particles, we are able to keep performing basic actions through pattern recognition, and these patterns are *as real as* the reduced view.

So how do these patterns exist and are identified and intended? In co-production: our own identification as patterns, and therefore our constitution in such a way, as presence in contextual relation – always valorized – to the semantic network we are embedded into means to recognize certain patterns. So patterns are, obviously, also empty. Nonetheless, they make it possible to talk about the things we cognize.

IV.3.3. Žižek: *posing one's own ground*

If alterity is given through another, how can we give alterity, since there are no others nor selves? Relationality is demolished, as well as becoming: everything is empty. Emptiness appears to disaggregate co-dependent arising too (MK 1:5, 7:15; Magno 2002: 358). Žižek offers a solution to this problem, so as to make emptiness thinkable and thus something that can be proposed (even if, it has to be remembered, one should not grasp any view nor maintain any theoretical position, only furthering *prapañca* and thus the radical crisis).

Slavoj Žižek is as famous as a controversial thinker, whose entire work is focused on Hegel with an extensive use of Lacanian psychoanalysis applied to society, instead that to the mere individual, through extensive use of pop culture. His philosophical account of subjectivity, interpreting Hegel and restructuring dialectical materialism, are extremely useful to construct a theoretical understanding of how this “empty presence” can work. Following Hegel and Lacan, Žižek proposed that the subject is actually always given only when confronted with the Other – which, of course, is at the same time given in the same way, even if we may not be aware of it. This means that the subject, exactly as de Martino stated, cannot know that it is until knowing who it is: and when this knowledge is (continually) re-produced, this happens through the Other. I get to know myself, but this knowledge immediately poses its own premises: when I know, I am actually knowing as if I already knew, as if I already were – the subject just appears, instant by instant, being always re-made in its presence, whose appearance of continuity is guaranteed by the reiterated valorization of its experience of itself provided by the other. Things are empty – an ontological gap, in Žižek's words – but they are posed in the moment their premise is given and concealed, with a reversal: that which is after is actually just appeared, and its grounding is provided in that very moment.

The emptiness of the subject, the ontological nihilism (or, better, irrealism) implies the emergence of what we have seen being patterns from the overall “patternhood”, the context which is understood and through which the subjectivity is constituted. This point, for Žižek, shows the radical failure of the subject, whose core is radically empty, absent, giving rise to this endless, impossible desire mechanism. To the present thesis, more than the psychoanalytic as well as cultural and anti-capitalist critique, what matters is that the subject poses its own premises through the Other. The subject's emptiness, its being *barrè*, in lacanian terms, is always solved through the Other – the one who possesses my desire, as much as the contrary is true – whose encounter poses my presuppositions. These presuppositions are inverted and concealed through what Hegel called the *Ur-Verdrängung*, the primordial repression, which for Žižek is what constitutes the Real:

The Real thus lies not in what is the same, in the transcendent hard core beyond our narratives, but in the gap between different narratives—why? Because this gap between narrative forms brings out what is *ur-verdraengt* (primordially repressed) from/in the content. (Žižek 2014: 106)

The subject's emptiness and inconsistency is hidden by posing the very premises of this ontological gap through the Other. Co-produced arising, that is, in other terms, a radical interconnectedness, a bottomless relationality, implies that not only the *self* can never be absolutely *self*, but also that the *other* can never really be *other* (Magno 2002: 351).

As de Martino noted about the relationship between presence and world, commenting on what for him was Heidegger's limit (the incomplete break with the ontotheological tradition, for Derrida), both the presence and the world are insubstantial, lacking, radically at risk. This lack of being – the Buddhist *anattā* – is this inconsistency that, through its contrastive and “gappy” narratives, emerges as a “something” – the patterns we use to communicate, that which we operate with and within and which we continuously valorize.

Žižek, confronting Lacanian psychoanalysis (and, indirectly, his own work) with Buddhism, given various contact points, wonders: “how did the fall into *samsara*, the Wheel of Life, occur? This question is, of course, the exact opposite of the standard Buddhist concern: how can we break out of the Wheel of Life and attain *nirvana*?” (Žižek 2006: 336).

A very basic answer to such a question is contained in the *Cūlamālukya Sutta*, when the Buddha compared metaphysical questions to a man who has been wounded by an arrow but refuses help until he gets to know who shot it, etc. The problem is clearly that, Buddhism being a soteriology directed towards a very practical goal – to overcome what I have called the radical crisis – interrogating oneself on such problems, while certainly not useless (as Buddhist theoretical tradition clearly shows) cannot solve the problem: in fact, in Nāgārjuna's words, this will only worsen the condition, since *prapañca* (the conceptual proliferation) leads to grasping and, therefore, *dukkha*.

On the other hand, the reply may be: but why should I accept such a path, if I don't even know whether it makes sense, if its premises are true, if it is real that existence is radically in *crisis*, or if instead there are other ways out of this?

A more articulate answer, adding to what has already been said, can be this: when asked about our falling into this state, we are first of all (especially in the way Žižek structured the question) dealing with a narrative embedded into a Christian understanding; we are also posing a concealed origin, as well as someone who fell into some state of things – all statements that can and are to be rejected in both Nāgārjuna's and de Martino's terms: for Nāgārjuna, because all of them are of course absurd and empty; for de Martino, because they refer to the mythic-ritual level that protects our presence.

In any case, we may conclude by saying that *dukkha* emerges in co-production, in a reality in which there is nothing given. The ground is given – in Žižek's own understanding – in the act: the grounding of the path is produced by walking it. Therefore, trying to be even more radical than Žižek himself, what happens here is a completely empty reality, without any big Other (if not for strategic *upāya* needs), co-produced, defying every dialectics even if necessarily using

it in the conventional level⁶⁶. One can go as far as to say that there is, in fact, no samsara and no nirvana – as Nāgārjuna and others did – if not for allowing us to build and walk the path, absent itself. This escalation of dialectics is in fact directed to this self-transcendence and self-abolition which, then, reproduces itself in the conventional level of necessary dialectics, so as to become possible, actualised and re-posed every time, and everytime rejected altogether.

IV.3.4. Westerhoff: *irrealism*

At last, we may wonder whether this soteriology – a Buddhist-driven account of reality with a concern on ethics, agency, and possibility of talking about *presence* without self – can be endorsed in today’s scientific world, in contemporary philosophical terms, if and how it can work into it, and how can it benefit from it, and vice versa. Jan Westerhoff worked on this, proposing that

there are various theories within different parts of analytic philosophy (as well as in its larger orbit), including metaphysics, epistemology, the theory of personal identity, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, and cognitive science that could be joined up to form a systematic development and defense of key Madhyamaka claims. (Westerhoff 2020: xxix)

Westerhoff is the less famous name among these philosophers, but very probably known among scholars of Buddhism, being an expert of Nāgārjuna. After many publications devoted to Nāgārjuna and Buddhism, he released in 2020 a book called *The Non-Existence of the Real World*, which is his account of irrealism, a position put forth in a smaller scale in earlier works (e.g. Westerhoff 2011). Irrealism is a theoretical expression of Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka, defended only in Western terms through the book, without ever naming Buddhist philosophy. Westerhoff argues, carefully and consequentially, about four points, namely:

1. the non-existence of the external world;
2. the non-existence of the internal world;
3. the non-existence of ontological foundations;
4. the non-existence of foundational truths;

the result of which can be summed up as follows:

1. “By the denial of an external world I therefore mean a denial of objects that exist independent of human interests, concerns, and cognitive activities” (Westerhoff 2020: 1) – “we can still assert that our perceptions and intentional mental states connect us with an external world as long as we understand references to the world as being made exclusively ‘in the fiction’ of the perceptual interface” (Ibid: 80);

⁶⁶ It has been noted by Garfield (2002, p. 60) that the expression *saṃvṛti-satya* (what I have been called conventional reality) “enjoys one of the most delightful ambiguities of any philosophical term in any tradition. For it can literally mean ‘convention’ [...]. But it can also mean obscured, concealed, occluded, disguised”. Following Žižek, we can say that the conventional is concealed in that its grounding is removed, its impossible origin posed and reversed in the dialectical process.

2. “the assumption of an inner world to which we have epistemically privileged access, centred around a substantial self, an assumption that is erroneously superimposed on the appearance of conscious mental states, is deeply problematic. This inner world does not exist” (Ibid: 151);
3. “Dependence-chains for things do not bottom out in fundamental things, and dependence-chains for grounding facts do not bottom out in fundamental facts” (Ibid: 249)
4. “there is nothing real, nothing that is not itself an appearance and therefore to be spelt out in terms of something else, and hence nothing that could constitute the content of an ultimately true theory” (Ibid: 306).

In his book, Westerhoff tries to show how – according to the most recent understanding of some branches of science (e.g. cognitive sciences) and of philosophy (mostly analytic) –, we may put forth strong claims for the non-existence of these four points. We do not need to have a metaphysical belief in the existence of the external world, since it can be provided by our mind as a simulation that does not require to pose an externality. This does not mean that one can take refuge in an internal world, similarly inexistent. The arguments go on also about any grounding and truths, to the point where the whole argument – very familiar to those who are accustomed with Nāgārjuna – becomes empty itself, there being no foundational truths. The interesting point is that the whole critique is done through Western philosophy and science, without any reference to Buddhism, thus showing the potential efficacy of such an understanding of reality – which, most importantly, as Westerhoff emphasizes, does not make science impossible:

Philosophical theories, like scientific theories, are still useful to have at the level of appearance. What we cannot do is ascribe to any of them the status of a complete theory of the ultimate structure of the world (Ibid: 307).

As already mentioned, conventional truth and shared meaning can still be built and worked out: what emptiness implies at this level is more the detachment and overcoming of intellectual proliferation, but on an ethical and operative level we could and should be able to maintain our cognitive and discursive (viz. valorizing) abilities.

We have seen how what I have called (by reinterpreting de Martino’s ideas in a new light) the semantic network, the endless stream of valorization which in the dialectic movement of history enacts our presence – always rebuilt through value – entails the presence of everything else: everything constitutes our presence, from the other in a more psychoanalytic and existential sense to the objects of everyday experience, etc. This point is brought forth by Westerhoff as the interconnectedness of everything, or the *pratītyasamutpāda*. Since there is no grounding for anything, what exists – appearance being equated to existence, but without reality – is only standing on other things, everything supported by everything else. To repeat a quote from de Martino, every presence is in the condition for which “together with everyone in history stays, and with everyone in history falls” (FSV: 133). If Westerhoff’s argument has some strength – as I maintain it does – then the presence is really something that is not

“given”, instead is a virtual simulation of both internal and external world, of both perceiver and perceived. The presence is therefore this “being here” which is always given again through value, brought together with and by all the semantic network (the “world” of our experience).

The world is thus conventional, unreal, but in such a way that things are *almost* as before:

the naïve realist and the irrealist have different views of what the world is like. The former believes there to be a comprehensive theory of the world as it is in its most basic features, the latter can offer only local theories that describe specific aspects of the world – and needs to assert that the claim ‘there are no comprehensive theories’ is not itself part of a comprehensive theory (Westerhoff 2020: 306).

IV.2. *Some answers*

We have seen how a possible theoretical account for soteriology can be built. Drawing from what has been said, I will try to answer the four questions discussed above. The answers are not settled, but simply put into form so as to be theoretically tenable and useful in the context of this thesis. Therefore, and once again, the answers are to be read as empty, conventional, useful but not ultimate, and directed towards the present attempt to structure a soteriological doctrine in academic fashion.

1. *How can emptiness be built?*

Emptiness is used as a strategic device, an operator produced through conventional means and itself understood as empty. The problem arises when one tries to make sense of its significance and persuasive power. I argued that this works through contextual, rhetoric ability – *upāya* as skillful means – and the concealment of the mechanisms by which the message is produced. Emptiness is built as non-built, and works on the same level of all conventional reality, so that it has the power to defy other representations of reality in virtue of its conventionally meaningful critique. And how are we to talk of a conventional level of truth, if the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth?⁶⁷ I claimed that the apparent grounding of the conventional is to be found in the valorization of experience, that is, the continuous making of the presence through patterns.

2. *How can empty ethics be proposed?*

Empty ethics can be proposed more or less on the same mechanism of emptiness itself: they work as *upāyas*, and their value is conventional and contextual. They have to work on persuasive power based on certain conventional interpretations, preferably on deep-rooted, “evidence-based” data that can be widely recognized as positive (e.g. minimum definition of suffering, the recognition of universal displeasure toward suffering, the attempt to avoid it for all those who experience such states).

3. *How can presence be experienced?*

⁶⁷ See Ferraro 2013 (sp. p. 205) and the relative debate.

I discussed presence as a pattern which is built in an empty, and therefore co-dependent, semantic network. Drawing from Daniel Dennett's definition of patterns, and conjugating it with Slavoj Žižek's ontological gap, I proposed that the presence is an empty "core" which always produces itself in relation to the Other, which in itself is again, of course, empty. This experience of the self emerges immediately in contact with the (itself co-produced) Other and projects, retrospectively, its own (absent) ground, which is given as if already pre-given but is instead actualized in the making. Dennett's proposal of patterns can help to analytically define *presence* as a mild-realistic object, that is, something without proper consistency but of which we can talk and about which we can have information, build theories, and operate without any ontological necessity. The subject is empty, but we can understand what we are talking about and refer to it – thus allowing Nāgārjuna, for example, to reject a non-existent object, since the information about it is available and, de Martino would add, valorized in time. This valorization, in my elaboration, means to keep re-building the object-as-object (a pattern which has no objective existence, but a contextual and informative one) into the semantic network through a cycle of local beliefs, which are unreal – but real enough for our experience to sussist.

4. *How do dialectic and emptiness relate?*

Nagarjuna seems to reject dialectics, if not as a provisory instrument to address the path. De Martino sees history as a continuous dialectical process. Nāgārjuna's work implies that de Martino still lingers into conceptual proliferation; but de Martino may criticize Nāgārjuna's work for referring to a meta-historical level. Moreover, emptiness implies, in a recursive way, dialectics – as noticed by the San Lun school – since non-duality is attained only as an endless process. In this sense, dialectic tension and transcendence of dialectics cooperate in an anagogical enterprise for which the resolution is at every step "given" and always delayed, experienced but never attained because there is nothing to attain, even in the continuous strive for liberation through right action. The dialectic of presence co-implies the emptiness of things, which are nonetheless operatively acting and reacting in a dialectical process as real-enough patterns. Emptiness, therefore, paradoxically as it may seem, entails dialectics: things being empty means that they arise in codependency, which is nothing but a dialectical process if seen in operative terms.

At the same time, what has been said since here somehow justifies a particular perspective, one of epistemological fallibility or, better, *gelassenheit* (letting-go), in the sense of accepting that answering questions may not be helpful to the soteriological project:

Such questions cannot be usefully answered and are to be set aside since, from the soteriological point of view, their solution can contribute nothing to progress on the path to awakening (Ruegg 2010: 38).

Should we just leave words, discourse, and be silent? Once again: no. Discourse is intelligible, and silence – empty as everything – is useful only contextually, when built as a skillful means, in relation to something. The Buddha talked quite a lot, and there is a reason he is called "Lord of the words" (C, I, v. 9). Still,

“Not a single syllable has been uttered by you, o Lord, but any man who has to be converted, has been gladdened by the rain of your Doctrine” (C, II, v. 7).

The Buddha, therefore, talks without talking, acts without acting (C, II, v. 2) and obtains liberation through the non-perception of nirvana. This wondrous and paradoxical path is the one that emerges as a meaningful soteriology.

Conclusion – How to build a soteriology

This whole thesis was devoted to show how the narrative and creative process worked in the words of two great thinkers, and how, borrowing from their own works, it could be possible to build a soteriology. De Martino and Nāgārjuna were thus interpellated both externally and internally: externally, because I tried to convey a clear and critical account of their main ideas and of their possible mutual counterbalance; internally, because I also used their proposals in contrast and synergy to put forth a new understanding of some key problems that, up to this day, we all have to face.

To sum up in the most condensed way what was said along these pages, we have seen that, since individual experience is most usefully described as informative patterns that reflexively understand themselves as *presences*, and every pattern can exist only in relation to others in a dialectic, groundless process that we call *emptiness* – this welfare and care, or compassion, is to be applied to every part of the connectedness and co-produced series of patterns that continuously build each other, called *semantic network*, since no part of it can have priority nor can sussist by itself.

Therefore, in order to act not only morally correctly but also out of an intellectual and operative necessity, the whole semantic network is to be taken care of indiscriminately. This formalized *ethos* is to be applied in each specific, contextual case through practices that may take different forms. It is also not a dogma nor grounded, since once emptiness is understood it is clearly seen as empty itself by necessity, a higher-level *upāya* or skillful means to a goal that, contextually, reasonably and empirically is shared by the whole semantic network and all the more by higher sentient beings, ensnared into their own self-perception and mental states. In conclusion, *presence* is intertwined with the radical crisis, but when understood through *emptiness* as necessarily existing in a relational semantic network, a new ethic emerges that calls for a universal compassion.

Being present without falling into radical crisis is the soteriological consequence of realizing the embeddedness of presence in the semantic network: the minimum self-condition of being into one's transparent perception can be overcome through shared attention and letting go of all grasping. Presence as an experiential and operative functional fiction remains, being continuously reproduced in value, while the radical crisis fades, presence being finally seen as empty.

The presence seems to be in crisis (in fact, to be the very core of the crisis), but once understood as empty – something that can never be grasped – it becomes the solution: exactly because empty it can be enacted, co-produced with the whole of reality. Empty presence means the possibility to operate in the world through conventional – but real enough – means, which, as I tried to show, can be understood in a theoretically robust way.

It should not be forgotten that, although this thesis looked at the problem of the crisis broadly intended, and of the end of the world as a form of it – inherent to the radical crisis itself – de Martino's posthumous work is also concerned with a specific apocalypse: that of the West. The drama of the decadence of Western civilization, which as we have seen tormented many, is extremely present in de Martino and, today, may be somewhat enhanced. While some are, of course, optimistic – in the wave of new technologies and the increase of the total of knowledge, power and wealth in the world, things which nonetheless have been seen as

problematic – others call for apocalyptic outcomes. Apart from a “real” end of the world – which de Martino clarifies as nothing but the end of the possibility of valorization, of thinking of a world to be – the problem remains the falling of the entire edifice of Western civilization, of its own premises. The encounter with Buddhist soteriology, and its universal account for a problem and a cure which, as I tried to show, can be transposed into a robust, useful, and universal soteriology, regardless of cultural specifics, may be a direction towards a solution. A detailed analysis of the crisis of the West – hard even for de Martino’s masterpiece – is too wide to be covered in such a short space, and can obviously be questioned. What matters is that a certain tension inside what can be understood as Western culture seems to be disruptive to the point of self-destruction. A call for new ethics – but coming from some already tested experience – is needed to face these challenges. A robust theory may help to provide solid and persuasive ground for action, while at the same time being seen as empty.

A last question, therefore, arises – one that has already emerged through this work: why all this theory, if in the end mental proliferation and attachment to views is to be rejected for soteriological goals? The short answer is: obviously, because one has to understand the reasons why one does something, especially something as demanding as leaving all in search of liberation, projecting a very powerful and strong way of seeing things, thus because it takes some time and effort to be convinced and persuaded of any set of propositions. Also, because the problems discussed above seem very real and challenging, even if one already accepts a soteriology (namely, the Buddhist way).

The second part of the answer is this. The need for a robust theoretical background for any soteriology – in spite of the emphasis on practice, or on the non-duality of practice and theory – is particularly important in the academic environment, which can only move on that level. First of all, this makes it possible to explain with some academic distance and rigor certain practices and ideas, allowing them to be communicated, understood, and problematised. Even the most practical act has to be translated, analyzed and retold in a theoretical fashion – which process is part of what has been called valorization. Without such a process, practice itself may almost disappear, or become unintelligible. Theoresis – inasmuch as it avoids attachment and the claim of ultimate truth – has an important preliminary place in soteriology in that it can enlighten some parts that can be given for granted, and become itself a form of practice: when one realizes the need to build the ground for groundlessness, or the complete indifference of values if not on some conventional choice based on empty, belief-based chains of values, etc., one can actually come closer to the goal (in this case, of the soteriology I have been proposing here). Also, since we may become attracted to certain ideas through theoretical means and arguments, as well as aesthetics, or any other form of persuasion, a good theory may be needed to support certain arguments that may appear problematic. This does not mean an endorsement of such theory, nor an acceptance of its substantiality or truth; on the contrary, what I have been trying to show is how the very theoretical reflection – a philosophical endeavor, in the fashion of Western philosophy since its beginning as well as Indian and Buddhist philosophy in their soteriological research – can lead to the adherence to practice and the perception of the need, but also emptiness, of the very theory.

This reflection, in the end, becomes very akin to meditation and to a form of practice about one’s mind and experience, which, problematizing our immediate understanding, comes

closer to the “nature of things” – which, by not being such, is exactly as it is. All the mental proliferation goes towards its end by realizing how there is nothing to realize, and how studying oneself one overcomes oneself.

sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ |
na kva cit kasyacit kaścid dharma buddhena deśitaḥ ||
(MK XV: 24)

Main References

Ernesto de Martino

- De Martino, E. (2002). *Furore Simbolo Valore*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 2002. [FSV]
- De Martino, E. (1965). Rapporto sull'aldilà (F. Leoni, Ed.). *L'Europeo*, 21, 82–86.
- De Martino, E. (1975). *Mondo popolare e magia in Lucania*. Roma–Matera: Basilicata Editrice.
- De Martino, E. (1977). *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (C. Gallini, Ed.). Torino: Einaudi.
- De Martino, E. (1982). *Sud e Magia*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- De Martino, E. (1995). *Note di campo: spedizione in Lucania, 30 sett.-31 ott. 1952* (C. Gallini, Ed.). Lecce: Argo.
- De Martino, E. (2000). *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri. [MPR]
- De Martino, E. (2007). *Il mondo magico: prolegomeni a una storia del magismo*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri. [MM]
- De Martino, E. (2013) *La terra del rimorso. Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.
- De Martino, E. (2019). *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (G. Charuty, D. Fabre e M. Massenzio, Eds.). Torino: Einaudi [FM]

Nāgārjuna

Versions and translations of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* [MK] in chronological order:

- La Vallée Poussin, L. d. (1903-1913). *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās (Mādhyamikasūtras) de Nāgārjuna, avec la Prasannapadā commentaire de Candrakīrti*. St. Petersburg: Académie Impériale des Sciences.
- Inada, K. (1970). *Nagarjuna: A Translation of His Malamadhyamaka Karika*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press.
- Gnoli, R. (1979). *Le stanze del cammino di mezzo: Madhyamaka Karika*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Kalupahana, D. J. (1986). *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Garfield, J. L. (1995). *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bugault, G. (2002). *Nāgārjuna: Stances du milieu par excellence*. Paris: Gallimard.

Meli, M., & Magno, E. (2004). *Nāgārjuna: il cammino di mezzo*. Padova: Unipress.

Magno, E. (2012). *Nāgārjuna. Logica, dialettica e soteriologia*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis.

Siderits, M., & Katsura, S. (2013). *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

Versions and translations of *Vigrahavyavartani* [VV]

Westerhoff, Jan (2010). *The Dispeller of Disputes. Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyavartani*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Versions and translations of *Vaidalyaprakarana* [VP]

Westerhoff, Jan (2018). *Crushing the Categories. Vaidalyaprakarana*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

Versions and translations of *Yuktiṣaṣṭika* [YS]

Dragonetti, C., & Tola, F. (1983). The *Yuktiṣaṣṭikakārikā* of Nāgārjuna. *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 6(2): 94–123.

Versions and translations of *Ratnavali* [RV]

Bhikshu Dharmamitra (2009.) *A Strand of Dharma Jewels. A Bodhisattva's Profound Teachings On Happiness, Liberation, and the Path. The Rāja Parikathā Ratnāvalī Composed by Ārya Nāgārjuna for a South Indian Monarch*. Seattle: Kalavinka Press.

Versions and translations of *Śūnyatāsaptati* (SS)

Komito, D. R. (1987). *Nāgārjuna's Seventy Stanzas. A Buddhist Psychology of Emptiness*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.

Versions and translations of *Suḥṛllekha* (SL)

Padmakara Translation Group (Eds.) (2005). *Nagarjuna's Letter to a Friend, with Commentary by Kangyur Rinpoche*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.

Versions and translations of *Catuḥstava* (C)

Tola, F., & Dragonetti, C. (1985). Nāgārjuna's *Catuḥstava*. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 13: 1–54.

Secondary References

- Aames, J. (2019). Patternhood and Generality. A Peircean Approach to Emergence. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 11(2), 1–23.
- Adams, C. J. (2010). *The Sexual Politics of Meat. A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. New York / London: Continuum.
- Anacker, S. (2005). *Seven Works of Vasubandhu. The Buddhist Psychological Doctor*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Angelini, P. (2008). *Ernesto De Martino*. Roma: Carocci.
- Arnold, D. (2018). Ethics without Norms? Buddhist Reductionism and the Logical Space of Reasons. In J. M. Shields & D. Cozort (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics* (pp. 359–381). Oxford University Press.
- Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bauman, Z., & Obirek, S. (2016). *Conversazioni su Dio e sull'uomo*. Bari: Laterza.
- Berardini, S. F. (2013). *Ethos, presenza, storia: la ricerca filosofica di Ernesto De Martino*. Trento: Università degli studi di Trento.
- Berger, D. L. (2010). Acquiring Emptiness: Interpreting Nāgārjuna's MMK 24:18. *Philosophy East and West*, 60(1), 40–64.
- Berger, D. L. (2021). *Indian and Intercultural Philosophy. Personhood, Consciousness, and Causality*. London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Berrocal, E. G. (2009). "The Post-Colonialism of Ernesto de Martino: the Principle of Critical Ethnocentrism as a Failed Attempt to Reconstruct Ethnographic Authority. *History and Anthropology*, 20(2), 123–38.
- Borges, J. L. (2000). *The Aleph and Other Stories* (A. Hurley, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Bostrom, N. (2014). *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power* (M. Adamson & G. Raymond, Trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bradshaw, C. J. A., Ehrlich, P. R., Beattie, A., Ceballos, G., Crist, E., Diamond, J., Dirzo, R., Ehrlich, A. H., Harte, J., Harte, M. E., Pyke, G., Raven, P. H., Ripple, W. J., Saltré, F., Turnbull, C., Wackernagel, M., & Blumstein, D. T. (2021). Underestimating the

- Challenges of Avoiding a Ghastly Future. *Frontiers in Conservation Science*, 1(615419.), 1–10.
- Bugault, G. (1994). *L'Inde pense-t-elle ?* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Burrow, J. W. (2000). *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Butcher, J. N., Mineka, S., Hooley, J. M., & Nock, M. K. (2017). *Abnormal Psychology, Global Edition*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Calandrucchio, C. (2016). L'ethos del trascendimento in quanto universale che necessita del particolare. *Consecutio Temporum* 9, 1–11.
- Cardeña, E., & Winkelman, M. J. (2011). *Altering consciousness: Multidisciplinary perspectives: History, culture, and the humanities*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Case, A., & Deaton, A. (2020). *Deaths of despair and the future of capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Catanzaro, F. M. (2021). Visions, Symbols and Poetry. Mystical Experience in Three Christian Saints. *Aliter*, 15(1), 3–33.
- Catucci, M. T. (2013). 'Il cielo stellato sopra di me e la legge morale in me'. Ernesto de Martino e l'ethos del trascendimento nel valore. *La Ricerca Folklorica*, 67/68, *Ernesto de Martino: etnografia e storia*, 129–139.
- Ceballos, G., Ehrlich, P. R., & Raven, P. H. (2020). Vertebrates on the brink as indicators of biological annihilation and the sixth mass extinction. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 117(24), 13596–13602.
- Charuty, G. (2009). *Ernesto De Martino: les vies antérieures d'un anthropologue*. Marseille: Parenthèses.
- Cheng, A. A. (2019). *Ornamentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cheng, H. (1991). *Empty Logic. Mādhyamika Buddhism from Chinese Sources*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Cherchi, P., & Cherchi, M. (1987). *Ernesto De Martino: dalla crisi della presenza alla comunità umana*. Napoli: Liguori.
- Chopel, G. (2018). *The Passion Book: A Tibetan Guide to Love and Sex* (T. Jinpa & D. S. Lopez Jr., Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Clark, J. (2008). On Being None With Nature: Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 19(4), 6–29.
- Clayton, B. (2001). Compassion as a matter of fact: the argument from no-self to selflessness

- in Śāntideva's Śikṣāsamuccaya. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 2(1), 83–97.
- Collins, J. J. (Ed.). (2014). *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Craparo, Ortu & Hart (2019). *Rediscovering Pierre Janet. Trauma, Dissociation, and a New Context for Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Croce, B. (1951). *Filosofia Poesia Storia* (La Letteratura Italiana. Storia e Testi ed., Vol. 75). Napoli: Ricciardi.
- Deguchi, Y. (2021). Non-dualism of the Two Truths. Sanlun and Tiantai on Contradictions. In Y. Deguchi, J. L. Garfield, G. Priest, & R. Sharf (Eds.), *What Can't Be Said: Paradox and Contradiction in East Asian Thought* (pp. 57–79). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Jong, J. W. (1981). Review of Mervyn Sprung, 'Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way'. *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 23, 227–230.
- Delaney, N. (2022). Erotic Thoughts. In A. Grahle, N. McKeever, & J. Saunders (Eds.), *Philosophy of Love in the Past, Present, and Future* (124–130). London-New York: Routledge.
- Della Costa, F. (2015). Le vite successive di un antropologo. Ernesto de Martino cinquant'anni dopo. *Studi culturali*, 3, 413–422.
- Dennett, D. C. (1987). *The Intentional Stance*. Cambridge: A Bradford Book.
- Dennett, D. C. (1991). Real Patterns. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 88(1), 27–51.
- Derrida, J. (1978). *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (D. B. Allison, Ed.; J. P. Leavey, Trans.). New York: Nicolas Hays.
- Derrida, J. (2003). *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (P.-A. Brault & M. Naas, Eds.). Paris: Éd. Galilée.
- Détienne, M. (1998). *Apollon le couteau à la main: une approche expérimentale du polythéisme grec*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Détienne, M., & Vernant, J.-P. (1979). *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Doctor, T. H. (2020). True Love for the Artificial? Toward the Possibility of Bodhisattva Relations with Machines. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 27: 339–356.
- Drewes, D. (2010). Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism I: Recent Scholarship. *Religious Compass*, 4(2), 55–65.
- Farinelli, F. (2009). *La crisi della ragione cartografica*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Ferrari, F. M. (2012). *Ernesto de Martino on Religion: The Crisis and the Presence*.

Sheffield: Equinox.

- Ferraro, G. (2013). A Criticism of M. Siderits and J. L. Garfield's 'Semantic Interpretation' of Nāgārjuna's Theory of Two Truths. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 41, 195–219.
- Finnigan, B. (2018). Madhyamaka Ethics. In D. Cozort & J. M. Shields (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics* (pp. 162–183). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foer, J. S. (2009). *Eating Animals*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Foucault, M. (1961). *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Paris: Plon.
- Freud, S. (2010). *Civilization and Its Discontents* (J. Strachey, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Gallagher, S. (2011). Introduction: A Diversity of Selves. In S. Gallagher (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Self* (pp. 1–29). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Garfield, J. L. (2002). *Empty words*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Garfield, J. L. (2015). *Engaging Buddhism. Why It Matters to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garfield, J. L. (2021). Silence and Upāya. Paradox in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*. In Y. Deguchi, J. L. Garfield, G. Priest, & R. H. Sharf (Eds.), *What Can't Be Said* (pp. 42–56). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garfield, J. L., & Westerhoff, J. C. (2011). Acquiring the Notion of a Dependent Designation: A Response to Douglas L. Berger. *Philosophy East and West*, 61(2), 365–367.
- Geisshuesler, F. A. (2021). *The Life and Work of Ernesto De Martino Italian Perspectives on Apocalypse and Rebirth in the Modern Study of Religion*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gilens, M., & Page, B. I. (2014). Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(3), 564–581.
- Gnoli, R., Sferza, F., Cicuzza, C. (2004). *Buddhismo. Testi antichi dal Canone Pāli*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Goldberg, G. S. (Ed.). (2009). *Poor Women in Rich Countries: The Feminization of Poverty Over the Life Course*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gould, H., & Walters, H. (2020). Bad Buddhists, Good Robots: Techno-Salvationist Designs for Nirvana. *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 21: 277–294.
- Grela, J. (2018). Buddhism Goes Digital. New Phenomena in the Old Tradition. *Journal of Nāṇasaṃvara Centre for Buddhist Studies (JNCBS)*, 1: 67–86.
- Guénon, R. (1946). *La crise du monde moderne*. Paris: Gallimard.

- Hanegraaff, W. J. (2003). How magic survived the disenchantment of the world. *Religion*, 33, 357–380.
- Hanegraaff, W. J. (2022). *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harvey, P. (2013). Dukkha, Non-Self, and the Teaching on the Four ‘Noble Truths’. In S. M. Emmanuel (Ed.), *A companion to Buddhist philosophy* (pp. 26–45). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hayes, R. P. (2003). *Nāgārjuna: Master of Paradox, Mystic or Perpetrator of Fallacies?* [Reading at the Philosophy Department at Smith College].
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1975). *Hegel's Logic: being part one of the Encyclopaedia of the philosophical sciences (1830)* (W. Wallace, Trans.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time* (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Hershock, P. D. (2021). *Buddhism and Intelligent Technology. Toward a More Humane Future*. London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hongladarom, S. (2020). *The Ethics of AI and Robotics: A Buddhist Viewpoint*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hood, B. (2012). *The self illusion. Why there is no “you” inside your head*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Houston, A. C. (1991). *Children in Poverty. Child Development and Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes, J.J. (2019). Buddhism and Our Posthuman Future. *SOPHIA* 58: 653–662.
- Hughes, J.J. (2012). Compassionate AI and Selfless Robots: A Buddhist Approach. In P. Lin, K. Abney, G. A. Bekey (Eds.), *Robot Ethics: the Ethical and Social Implications of Robotics* (pp. 69–83). Boston: MIT Press.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (D. Carr, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Jafino, B. A., Walsh, j., Rozenberg, J., & Hallegatte, S. (2020). Revised estimates of the impact of climate change on extreme poverty. *World Bank Group, Climate Change Group & Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery*, 1–17.
- Jonas, S. (2016). *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics. The Unspeakable in Art, Religion, and Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Joseph, W. (2006). *Nāgārjuna in Context. Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*.

New York: Columbia University Press.

- Kaza, S. (2018). Buddhist Environmental Ethics. An Emergent and Contextual Approach. In D. Cozort & J. M. Shields (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics* (pp. 432–452). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kihlstrom, J. F. (2001). Dissociative disorders. In H. E. Adams & P. B. Sutker (Eds.), *Comprehensive Handbook of Psychopathology* (3rd ed., pp. 259–76). Springer.
- King, B. J. (2017). *Personalities on the plate: The lives and minds of animals we eat*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- King, B. J. (2021). *Animals' Best Friends. Putting Compassion to Work for Animals in Captivity and in the Wild*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamotte, É. (1954). Sur la formation du Mahāyāna. In J. Schubert & U. Schneider (Eds.), *Asiatica: Festschrift Friedrich Weller*. (pp. 377–396). Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Lanternari, V. (1990). “Ernesto de Martino”, *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 38: 587–588.
- Legrand, D. (2013). Phenomenological Dimensions of Bodily Self-Consciousness. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Self* (204–227). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lehner, H.-C. (Ed.). (2021). *The End(s) of Time(s): Apocalypticism, Messianism, and Utopianism Through the Ages*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1978). *Myth and Meaning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Loy, D. R. (2018). *Ecodharma. Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Loy, D. R. (2019). *Nonduality. In Buddhism and Beyond*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Mabbett, I. W. (1995). Nāgārjuna and Deconstruction. *Philosophy East and West*, 42(2), 203–225.
- Mabbett, I. W. (1998). The problem of the historical Nāgārjuna revisited. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 118(3), 332–346.
- MacDonald, A. (2015). The Quest for an English-Speaking Nāgārjuna. *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 58(4), 357–375.
- Magno, E. (2002). Né il sé né l'altro. Un percorso intorno al problema dell'identità nel pensiero di Nāgārjuna. In U. Curi & B. Giacomini (Eds.), *Xenos. Filosofia dello straniero* (pp. 343–366). Padova: Il Poligrafo.
- Magno, E. (2016). Le due verità e le tre nature. Il problema gnoseologico tra Nāgārjuna e Vasubandhu. In E. Magno & M. Ghilardi (Eds.), *La filosofia e l'altrove: Festschrift per Giangiorgio Pasqualotto* (pp. 235–248). Milano-Udine: Mimesis.

- Malamoud, C. (1989). *Cuire le monde: Rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhang, J. (2013). Poverty Impedes Cognitive Functions. *Science*, 341, 976–980.
- Marraffa, M. (2021). Ernesto De Martino su crisi e riscatto della presenza. *Bollettino della società filosofica italiana*, 3, 59–72.
- Marquand, D. (2012). *The End of the West: The Once and Future Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Massenzio, M. (2005). The Italian school of ‘history of religions’. *Religion*, 35(4), 209–222.
- Massenzio, M., & Gallini, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Ernesto De Martino nella cultura europea*. Napoli: Liguori.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1992). *The Tree of Knowledge: the Biological Roots of Human Understanding*. Boulder: Shambhala.
- Meighoo, S. (2016). *The End of the West and Other Cautionary Tales*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Metzinger, T. (2003). *Being No One. The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Metzinger, T. (2009). *The Ego Tunnel. The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*. New York: Basic Books.
- Metzinger, T. (2016). Suffering. In K. Almqvist & A. Haag (Eds.), *The Return of Consciousness. A new science on old questions* (pp. 237–262). Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Axson Johnson Foundation.
- Miccoli, A. (2021). Algorithms of Desire. *Dukkha in the Machine*. In M.-S. Draga Alexandru & D. Manea (Eds.), *Religious Narratives in Contemporary Culture* (pp. 139-157). Leiden: Brill.
- Mignolo, W. (2011). *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Minsky, M. (1986). *The Society of Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Moore, J. W. (Ed.). (2016). *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Murti, T. R. (1983). *La filosofia centrale del buddhismo*. Roma: Astrolabio.
- Nagel, T. (1986). *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nishida, K. (1987). *Last writings: nothingness and the religious worldview* (D. A. Dilworth,

- Trans.). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- O'Connell, M. (2020). *Notes From an Apocalypse. A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back*. London: Granta.
- Pandolfi, M. (1992). Beyond Gramsci and De Martino: Medical Anthropology in Contemporary Italy. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 6(2), 162–5.
- Peri, C. (2003). *Il regno del nemico: la morte nella religione di Canaan*. Torino: Paideia.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pogge, T. (2010). *Politics as Usual. What Lies Behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pollan, M. (2006). *The Omnivore's Dilemma. A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin.
- Queen, C. (2018). The Ethics of Engaged Buddhism in the West. In D. Cozort & J. M. Shields (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics* (pp. 501–528). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rainer, S., & Malone, E. L. (2001). Climate Change, Poverty, and Intragenerational Equity: The National Level. *International Journal of Global Environmental Issues*, 1(2), 175–202.
- Ram-Prasad, C. (2012). Introduction. In I. Kuznetsova, J. Ganeri, & C. Ram-Prasad (Eds.), *Hindu and Buddhist Ideas in Dialogue: Self and No-Self* (pp. 11–31). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Raveri, M. (2010). Racconti dell'inizio. In E. Magno & A. Pavan (Eds.), *Antropogenesi: ricerche sull'origine e lo sviluppo del fenomeno umano* (pp. 85–103). Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Reber, A. S., Baluska, F., & Miller, W. B. J. (2022). All living organisms are sentient. *Animal Sentience*, 31(3), 1–4.
- Ripple, W. J., Wolf, C., Newsome, T. M., Barnard, P., & Moomaw, W. R. (2020). World scientists' warning of a climate emergency. *Bioscience*, 70, 8–12.
- Ripple, W. J., Wolf, C., Newsome, T. M., Galetti, M., Alamgir, M., Crist, E., Mahmoud, M. I., & Laurance, W. F. (2017). World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice. *Bioscience*, 67(12), 1026–1028.
- Robinson, R. H. (1972). Did Nāgārjuna Really Refute All Philosophical Views? *Philosophy East and West*, 22(3), 325–331.
- Rorty, R. (1982). *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Rose, J. D., Arlinghaus, R., Cooke, S. J., Diggles, B. K., Sawynok, W., Stevens, E. D., & Wynne, C. D. (2014). Can fish really feel pain? *Fish and Fisheries*, 15(1), 97–133.
- Ruegg, David Seyfort. 2010. *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle. Essays on Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Samten, N., & Garfield, J. L. (2006). *Ocean of Reasoning: a Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Santos, B. d. S. (2015). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Saunders, G. R. (1993). Critical Ethnocentrism' and the Ethnology of Ernesto de Martino. *American Anthropologist*, 95(4), 875–93.
- Saunders, G. R. (1995). The Crisis of Presence in Italian Pentecostal Conversion. *American Ethnologist*, 22(2), 324–40.
- Schopen, G. (2000). The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese Looking-glass. *The Eastern Buddhist NEW SERIES*, 32(2), 1–25.
- Sebastian, C. D. (2016). *The Cloud of Nothingness. The Negative Way in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross*. Springer India.
- Seneca, L. A. (1994). *La brevità della vita* (A. Traina, Trans.). Milano: Rizzoli.
- Seyfort Ruegg, D. (1981). *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*. Wiesbaden: Harassowitz.
- Shafer-Landau, R. (Ed.). (2012). *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sharf, R. H. (2021a). Chan Cases. In Y. Deguchi, J. L. Garfield, G. Priest, & R. H. Sharf (Eds.), *What Can't Be Said: Paradox and Contradiction in East Asian Thought* (pp. 80–104). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sharf, R. H. (2021b). Mind in World, World in Mind. In Y. Deguchi, J. L. Garfield, G. Priest, & R. H. Sharf (Eds.), *What Can't Be Said: Paradox and Contradiction in East Asian Thought* (pp. 152–171). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shulman, E. (2009): Creative Ignorance. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 30(1-2): 139–173.
- Siderits, M. (2007). *Buddhism as a philosophy*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.
- Siderits, M. (2020). Self-knowledge and non-self. In C. Keng, J. Spackman, & M. Siderits (Eds.), *Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness: Tradition and Dialogue* (pp. 189–208). Leiden: Brill.
- Silvia, M. (1999). Postface (M. Baudoux, Trans.). In *Le monde magique*. Paris: Sanofi-Synthélabo.

- Smith, J. W. (2021). Snakes and Ladders’–‘Therapy’ as Liberation in Nagarjuna and Wittgenstein’s Tractatus. *Sophia*, 60, 411–43.
- Spengler, O. (1991). *The Decline of the West* (H. Werner, A. Helps, & C. F. Atkinson, Eds.; C. F. Atkinson, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sprung, M. (1979). *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*. London: Routledge & K. Paul.
- Squarcini, F. (2007). *Ex Oriente Lux, Luxus, Luxuria. Storia e sociologia delle tradizioni religiose sudasiatiche in Occidente*. Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina.
- Squarcini, F. (2016). Sotto gli occhi di tutti. Riflessioni sulle fonti normative sanscrite circa la logica delle cose, le Politiche della Percezione e l’embodiment della ‘realtà’. In M. Ghilardi & E. Magno (Eds.), *La filosofia e l’altrove: Festschrift per Giangiorgio Pasqualotto* (pp. 275–320). Milano-Udine: Mimesis.
- Storch, A., & Kulenkampff, C. (1950). Zum Verständnis des Weltuntergangs bei den Schizophrenen. *Der Nervenarzt*, 21, 102–8.
- Tanaka, K. (2021). How Can Buddhists Prove That Non-Existent Things Do Not Exist? In T. Goldschmidt & S. Bernstein (Eds.), *Non-Being: New Essay on the Metaphysics of Non-Existence* (pp. 82–96). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, M. C. (1984). *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Teasdale, J. D., & Chaskalson, M. (2011). How does Mindfulness Transform Suffering? I: The Nature and Origins of Dukkha. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(1), 89–102.
- Tillemans, T. J. F. (2016). *How Do Madhyamikas Think? And Other Essays on the Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Tomasello, M. (2000). *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tomasello, M. (2008). *Origins of Human Communication*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Tomasello, M. (2016). *A Natural History of Human Morality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tomasello, M. (2020). The Adaptive Origins of Uniquely Human Sociality. *Philosophical Transaction B, The Royal Society*, 375, 1–7.
- Tuck, A. P. (1990). *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship. On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Valisano, M. (2017). Esserci, ovvero far differenza. *In limine*, 175-192.
- Van Norden, B. W. (2017). *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. New York:

- Columbia University Press.
- Van Wolde, E. (1999). *Racconti dell'inizio. Genesi 1-11 e altri racconti di creazione* (F. Dalla Vecchia, Trans.). Brescia: Queriniana.
- Varela, F. J., Rosch, E., & Thompson, E. (1991). *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Von Weizsäcker, E. U., & Wijkman, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Come On! Capitalism, Short-termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet*. New York: Springer.
- Watkins, C. (1995). *How to Kill a Dragon. Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Westerhoff, J. C. (2009a). *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. A Philosophical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Westerhoff, J. C. (2009b). The No-Thesis View: Making Sense of Verse 29 of Nāgārjuna's Vīṅraḥavyāvartanī. In J. L. Garfield, M. D'Amato, & T. J.F. Tillemans (Eds.), *Pointing at the Moon. Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy* (pp. 25–39). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Westerhoff, J. C. (2010). *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nagarjuna's Vīṅraḥavyāvartanī*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Westerhoff, J. (2011). *Reality: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Westerhoff, J. C. (2020). *The Non-Existence of the Real World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wetleson, J. (2002). Did Śāntideva destroy the bodhisattva path? *Journal of Buddhist ethics*, 9, 1-30.
- Wetzel, A. (1922). Das Weltuntergangserlebnis in der Schizophrenie. *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie*, 78(1), 403–28.
- Williams, P. (1998). *Studies in the philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra: altruism and reality*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell Publishers, Ed.; G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1956). *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (G. H. von Wright, G. E. M. Anscombe, & R. Rhees, Eds.; G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zimmerman, M. (1983). Towards a Heideggerian Ethos for Radical Environmentalism. *Environmental Ethics*, 5(2), 99–131.

- Zinn, D. L. (2015). Tradurre Ernesto De Martino, dal travaglio al trascendimento. *Aut-Aut* 366, 105-113.
- Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London-New York: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2006). *Interrogating the Real* (S. Stephens & R. Butler, Eds.). London-New York: Continuum.
- Žižek, S. (2011). *Living in the End Times*. London-New York: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2014). *Absolute Recoil. Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*. London-New York: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2015). *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*. New York: Melville House.
- Žižek, S., & Gunjevic, B. (2012). *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (E. Elias-Bursac, Trans.). New York: Seven Stories Press.

Sitography

- Arnold, D. (2005). *Madhyamaka Buddhist Philosophy*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved May 5, 2022, from <https://iep.utm.edu/madhyamaka-buddhist-philosophy/>
- Associazione Nazionale Ernesto de Martino. <http://www.ernestodemartino.it/>
- Magno, E. (2017). *Crisi. L'altro nome del dolore (duḥkha)*. Unione Buddhista Italiana. Retrieved June 23, 2022, from <https://unionebuddhistaitaliana.it/dialogo-interreligioso/crisi-laltro-nome-del-dolore-du%e1%b8%a5kha/>
- Westerhoff, J. C. (2020). *Nāgārjuna*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (E. N. Zalta Ed.). Retrieved June 20, 2022 <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/nagarjuna/>
- Kripke, G. (2016), *Rich People Can End Poverty*. Oxfam. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://politicsofpoverty.oxfamamerica.org/rich-people-can-end-poverty/>
- Kharas, H. (2021) *Elon Musk, billionaires, and the United Nations: The 1% solution to global development*. Brookings. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2021/11/05/elon-musk-billionaires-and-the-united-nations-the-1-solution-to-global-development/>
- Forbes (2021). *World's Billionaires List: The Richest in 2021*. Forbes. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>

Forbes (2021). *The Real-Time Billionaires List*. Forbes. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/#1f2cf3c13d78/>

United Nations. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Retrieved May 26, 2022, from sustainabledevelopment.un.org/

Jafino et al. (2020). *Revised Estimates of the Impact of Climate Change on Extreme Poverty by 2030*. World Economic Forum. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-risks-report-2022&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1653563461685390&usg=AOvVaw3cCpHMXiaA04IVmERrlrFS/>