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PHENOMENOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE COGNITIVE SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The importance of bringing together perspectives in cognitive science and phenomenology cannot be overemphasized. Cognition as enacted, that is to say, as embodied action, is about the interdependence of world and mind. It is a mutuality of dependence made evident in the relations between mind and world, involving interaction or embodied action. Hence cognition as embodied action seems to be a genuine understanding of the Buddhist groundlessness. The aim of this Buddhist tradition is realizing egolessness in one's own experience and manifesting it in actions towards others. Our meditative mindfulness/awareness of our co-dependent origination, emptiness, compassion, and naturalness helps us achieve this praxis-oriented, mind-body, I-neighbor philosophy. It is this co-dependent origination that matches the Western experience of groundlessness and its relation to the science of the mind and the notion of enacting. Nothing has an independent existence. Things are entirely empty and groundless due to their co-dependent origination. Their co-dependent origination empties them of any ultimate or independent existence. As one becomes mindful/aware of one's experience, one realizes the irrational impulse to seek after foundations. It is then that one begins to acquire and cherish emptiness. One is empty of a specific fact of experience, for instance, empty of the obsession of wanting to understand and explain everything, because one realizes the emptiness of this urge; for, experience appears to teach one of the apparent groundlessness of things. One's prejudices and Angst are empty of the groundings one ascribes to them, and thus, are empty of any real existence. Developing a culture of compassionate and concerned interest in others, it seems, is capable of supplanting an Angst-motivated egoistic life option. This shows how being mindful/aware could be at the same time a theory and a practice.

1.0 THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL AT THE INTERFACE OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND THE SCIENTIFIC

Of all the efforts in cognitive science at going beyond Merleau-Ponty, Varela's The Embodied Mind does stand out, for seeking to bring together perspectives in cognitive science and phenomenology. As with Merleau-Ponty, Varela and his colleagues, attempt, without making any reference to a transcendent cause, to account for the passage from processes that are ostensibly blind and mechanical to those processes that belong to the higher order; a phenomenon characteristic of mental life.

Varela shares Merleau-Ponty's insight that life is a paradox; although he restricts himself mostly to the epistemological dimension. The activity of cognition is at its root paradoxical, he argues. On the one hand, the activity that produces a world is an effort at re-establishing a coupling with a surround (Umwelt) that always resists and violates internal coherence via encounters and disruptive disturbances. On the other hand, such an activity, simultaneously, effectuates the demarcation and separation of the organism from that environment, generating a world that is distinct (see Varela, 1991, 87).

Varela believes that the cognitive sciences ought to broaden their horizon to include our lived experience and the fact that the human experience comes with built-in possibilities to transform itself. He also proposes that our everydayness, commonplace experience, should, for its part, widen its horizon to gain from findings in and contributions from the cognitive sciences. Varela and his colleagues decry the absence of this mutual exchange between human experience and the cognitive sciences. They regret that these sciences of the mind have been silent on what being human means in our commonplaceness and our day-to-day lived-situations. In like manner, they acknowledge disciplines and institutions given to ascertaining how best to analyze, understand, and explore the inherent potentials and possibilities for our everyday life to transform itself, and suggest that these should formulate their research findings in ways accessible to science.

Varela and his colleagues take an investigative leap into the phenomenon of groundlessness and at the end of their journey discover that what they had accepted as solid grounds are actually no more than shifting sands underneath their sandals. Starting with commonsense as cognitive scientists, they discover that cognition emerges within the setting of a world that stretches farther than us and yet does not manifest except in the context of our embodied activities. At first they move their focus away from this basic circularity into the cognitive movement only; they find no subjective ground, no enduring and unchanging self. Expecting to run into the objective world they believed was still there, they come across only a world enacted by its "history of structural coupling." In the end, they discover that these different kinds of groundlessness are actually one.

They find that the organism and its surround enwrap each other and blossom forth from each other in life's basic circuitry (Varela, 1993, 217).

While the worlds that the series of past events of structural couplings enact can be scientifically investigated to any detail, they do not have any enduring or lasting foundation and are, therefore, in the final analysis groundless. It is for us now, they hold, to resolve to confront this groundlessness that we discover in a thousand and one forms. They point out that though Western scientific and philosophical cultures have dragged us to the level where, as Putnam indicates, it has become impossible conceiving of credible foundations, they are yet to guide us into developing an unmediated and personal perceptivity and discernment of the groundlessness of the human everydayness (Varela, 1993, 217-218). If philosophy thinks this unessential and unneeded, it is because the Western philosophical culture busies itself more with understanding life and mind rationally than with the importance of a practical and lifelike procedure for transforming man's experience.

Varela and his colleagues contend that our historical condition calls not only for our dispensing with "philosophical foundationalism" but also for our learning to dwell in a world bereft of

foundations. Science cannot perform this phenomenal assignment unless it incorporates our commonplace experience. Hilary Putnam in his The Faces of Realism (1987, 28) articulates this dilemma very well. He describes how marvelous science is in demolishing metaphysical accounts and how incapable it is in offering alternative answers. Science, he says dismantles foundations and does not cater for substitutions. Without seeking our consent, science has dragged us to a level where we have to lead our lives devoid of foundations. We were all taken aback when Nietzsche first muted this idea, but it is now well-adapted, and no longer out of the ordinary. Our historical situation is that we have to do our philosophizing not having the use of foundations (Varela et al., 1993, 218).

All the same, Varela and his colleagues note, the West is not alone in the effort to live in a world without foundations. The problem of groundlessness is the primary concern of the Madhyamika tradition. Rather than presume a-priori that its historical situation is so unparalleled that no other culture could be of help, Western philosophical culture could draw on the wealth of this civilization (Varela et al., 1993, 219). For all his critique of Western foundationalism, for instance, Richard Rorty could only proffer as substitute an idea of "edifying philosophy" with the overriding aim of "continuing the conversation of the West" (Rorty, 1979, 394). He neither had the intellectual disposition nor the scientific thoroughness to scout around for reflections and articulations from other philosophical cultures that bear on his worry. One such philosophical culture is the Madhyamika tradition.

The Madhyamika tradition does not separate philosophical rationalization/theorizing from the meditative practice, or life practice. It does not separate theorizing from acting in the life-world. The focal point of this tradition is realizing egolessness in one's own experience and manifesting it in actions towards others. Terms that go with this praxis oriented, mind-body, I-neighbor philosophy are co-dependent origination, emptiness, compassion, and naturalness (Varela et al., 1993, 220). The Middle Way of Nagarjuna "carries through the logic of codependent" origination to its ultimate terminus. It is this mental-practical, mind-body notion of co-dependent origination lived through that Varela says suits the finding of groundlessness and its relation to the science of the mind and the notion of enaction.

Nagarjuna denies the idea of independent existence in all its ramifications. Nothing has an independent existence. We have neither a world that exists independently nor a mind that exists independently nor a mind that has an independent relation to an independently existing body. Thus neither the subject nor the object nor the relation has any independent existence. Things and their properties, causes and their effects, none exists independently of the other (Varela et al., 1993, 221). One indication, argues Nagarjuna, that there is no independent existence is the fact that no seeing exists prior to or after the seeing; there is only a co-dependent arising (Varela et al., 1993, 222). Things are entirely empty and groundless due to their co-dependent origination. Within the context of a meditative mindfulness/awareness developed and anchored in psychologically actual mental habits, things are groundless and empty because they arise co-dependently (Varela et al., 1993, 223).

The highlights of Nagarjuna's logic are as follows: First, if things were to exist independently, they would not depend on conditions or relations, as is the case; second, we do not find anything other than its "conditions" of origination, development, and disintegration, indicating a dependent co-arising. Therefore things are equally (co-) dependent on one another, a

"fundamental circularity" in the (favorite) terminology of Varela. Third, due to their co-dependent origination, things are empty of any independent (ultimate) existence.

We know how the fundamental emptiness of things comes about. It is the co-dependent arising of things that empties them of any "independent intrinsic nature." Being co-dependently originated, they are thus empty of any ultimate or independent existence (Varela et al., 1993, 224).

2.0 MINDFULNESS/AWARENESS OF ONE'S EXPERIENCE

What the Buddhist philosophical tradition actually offers one are "descriptions and contemplative directives" of how one in actuality experience one's mind when one is mindful (Varela et al., 1993, 224). When does one achieve mindfulness/awareness of one's experience? As one becomes mindful/aware of one's experience, one realizes the magnet of the misleading urge, or of the irrational impulse, if you will, to seek after foundations. It is then that one begins to acquire and cherish emptiness. Emptiness is a "natural discovery" one makes by oneself as one acquires adequate mindfulness/awareness of one's experience. Nothing is concealed in experience. For, as mind-world goes on occurring in its "interdependent continuity," there isn't anything more to "know or be known further" regarding mind or world.

The middle way wards off the dilemma of having to choose between the extreme alternatives of "objectivism or subjectivism, of absolutism or nihilism" (Varela et al., 1993, 225). This pragmatic philosophy treats every phenomenon as a dependent arising, bypassing the extremity of the nihilist philosophy, while showing how nature's cause-effect relations are "dependent arisings". It also avoids the absolutist thought trajectory predicated on the claim of inherent existence of all phenomena, since it insists that every natural phenomenon is empty (Hopkins, 1983, 168).

Nagarjuna's articulation of Buddhist thought recognizes two truths, relative and absolute truths. Relative truth is the "phenomenal world just as it happens." Ultimate truth is the emptiness of this phenomenal world. The differentiation of the relative truth from the ultimate truth, as with the analysis of the mind, is not meant as a metaphysical theorizing. It rather describes one's experience as a practitioner as one experiences one's "mind, its objects, and their relation" as co-dependently arisen and therefore as empty of a real, independent, enduring, or absolute existence. As with the analysis of one's experience of one's mind (awareness), this differentiation describes our practice of our co-dependent emptiness (Varela et al., 1993, 226).

Just as the experience of color lacks any "absolute ground" in both the material world and the perceiver, concepts, such as enactive cognitive science, are all historical, that is to say, co-dependent, and as such have no ultimate/absolute foundation (Varela et al., 1993, 227-228). Hence, scientific analysis and Buddhist groundlessness fit. Varela and his colleagues proffer a notion of enactive (embodied-action-dependent) science of mind (cognitive science) and of evolution as a natural drift, as an approximation of Buddhist philosophy and another viable, inclusive way of doing science. They argue that their notions of embodied cognition and structural coupling, as with any other, are concepts and as concepts these remain historical. This does not deny a personal mind and a world out there, though. Yet cognition as enaction, that is to say, as embodied action, is about the interdependence of world and mind. It is a reciprocity and a mutuality of dependence made evident in the relations between mind and

world, involving interaction, embodied action, enaction. Hence cognition as embodied action is a genuine understanding of the Buddhist groundlessness (Varela et al., 1993, 228).

3.0 CONCEIVING OF AND MANAGING GROUNDLESSNESS IN TODAY'S WORLD: THE WESTERN EXPERIENCE

In his The End of Modernity, Gianni Vattimo, argues for the positive possibility of the cognizance of loss of foundations in today's Western science and philosophy. The Nietzschean and Heideggerian thoughts, more than any other, he writes, afford us the opportunity/possibility of making our way from describing postmodernism solely critically and negatively to treating it positively as a "possibility and opportunity." In his idea of positive nihilism, Nietzsche did indicate this, without some measure of clarity though. The Heideggerian notion of Verwindung of metaphysics, hardly a decisive overcoming in the contemporary understanding of this terminology, is also an allusion to this. Thus, Vattimo asserts, the Nietzschean and Heideggerian thoughts weaken Being to a degree that permits it to constructively place itself in the post-modern framework. This is so because the "positive opportunities" for man's essence contained in the existential conditions of post-modernity are hardly accessible to us without a painstaking appreciation of the consequences of the Nietzschean and Heideggerian "destruction of ontology." In such a really post-metaphysical epoch, he maintains, thought cannot find any positive dwelling place until we part with a metaphysical and Platonic conception of being and man as "stable structures." Notions such as this demand the stabilization or grounding of thought and existence, logically or ethically, in non-becoming. Such notions find expression in the way we go all-out to mystify "strong structures" in our entire experiential domain. Even as all in an epoch cannot be just as helpful, one can discern elements that highlight the innate features of the era and that acknowledges it as holding out some possibilities for us rather than as negating everything human (Vattimo, 1989, 11-12).

Varela and his colleagues contend that this acknowledgement by the Italian philosopher, Vattimo, reveals the extent of the sensitization of today's Westerner on the question of groundlessness in the historical, political, scientific, arts, and philosophical fields. What is more it does highlight to what degree Western culture, founded on philosophical rationalization and scientific pragmatism, and Buddhist practice and thought, built on having a mindful and aware experience of the world have harmoniously come together.

Varela and his colleagues assert that Western thought has not been capable of articulating conjointly the giving up of grounding both for self (subject?) and world (object?). There is a curious lack a methodological footing for a middle course between the two competing varieties of absolutism, namely, objectivism and subjectivism. The striving for scientific objectivity in experimental psychology and in the cognitive sciences gives rise to the "fragmentation of the self" (Varela et al., 1993, 230). We lose sight of the self because we regard it as an object, the other in our world, an object of scientific inspection and manipulation. In much the same way, we take exception to the world's objective status by not thematizing the subjective dimension. First, we assume the givenness of an independent subject and then we attempt to discover and argue from the "subjective nature of his representations." This is the so-called top-down procedure of the scientist. The subtle consequence of all this is the adoption of the view that we never perceive in wholly objective ways because our perceptions are at all times under the influence of our past experiences and present goals (Varela et al., 1993, 230).

Varela and his colleagues lament Hume's failure to follow through to its logical conclusion his unsuccessful attempt at observing an unbroken self and an enduring world. Hume denies a non-fragmented, stable self and an abiding world. Yet, his works show no indication that he ever conceived of the idea of bringing together and treating in one piece his denial of a non-fragmented self and a non-fragmented world. They contend that he had every intellectual material necessary for this treating-in-one-piece, but that not having either the "intellectual tradition" to indicate it or the "experiential method" to detect and get to know it, he could not consider the possibility (Varela et al., 1993, 231).

The aforementioned treating-in-one-piece (of knowledge about self and world) is due to the fact that our life-world or lived experience is all about the taking-together of what we conceptualize as the world and that which we conceive of as the mind. Incidentally, confronted with this belonging-together of the two aspects of the attitude of the 'mind,' the cognitive scientist takes refuge in theories, because today's scientific culture leaves him with no other alternative (Varela et al., 1993, 231). We must challenge the idea of an "object-independent" mind as much as we take exception to the notion of a "mind-independent" object (Varela et al., 1993, 233).

In the Buddhist philosophy and psychology, being embodied is a prerequisite for attaining realization. Here, the terms, awareness, mindfulness, and emptiness, rather than being abstract concepts, have their practical applications in the life-world. There must be something to which each one applies. The Buddhist practitioner is not mindful in a vacuum, aware in a vacuum, or empty of a vacuum. It is about the awareness of something, the mindfulness of something, realizing the emptiness of something, realizing that a certain thing is intrinsically good, being compassionate for a particular thing. He is empty of a specific fact of experience, for instance, empty of the obsession of wanting to understand and explain everything, because he realizes the emptiness of this urge; for experience has taught him the lessen of the groundlessness of things. Thus, the contents of this emptiness, awareness, or mindfulness are one's habits, one's customary prejudices and hate culture, one's inability to adopt a live-and-let-live life option. It is also about our customary patterns of comprehending, prejudicial relations, intolerance, Angst, and frustration. Recognizing that these are empty of the groundings one ascribe to them, and thus, that they are "empty of any actual existence," makes itself manifest experientially as an increasing "openness and lack of fixation." Developing a culture of "compassionate interest in others" is capable of supplanting an Angst-motivated egoistic life-option. This shows how being mindful is at once a theory and a practice (Varela et al., 1993, 234).

Let us use the concept and practice of freedom as a case study. In Nagarjuna's middle way and its practice of emptiness, the everyday lived experience of the life-world and freedom belong together. There is no difference between them (Kalupahana, 1986, xxv: 19 & 20). Freedom is action-oriented. It is about the practicalities of everyday life. Far from being synonymous with living in our day-to-day world hemmed in (and held hostage) by ignorance and confusion, freedom is when we live and act in the everydayness of the life-world duly realizing the world around us. Freedom is far from being some form of escapism that enables us evade the everyday practices of the lived world. It is not escaping from the practical world into alcohol-related or drug-related hallucinations of an imaginary world. Freedom is not pretending not to notice the world around us or refusing to take action in relation to the world around us. It is not a see-nothing, do-nothing attitude. Freedom is rather about transforming our whole manner of living,

transforming our mode of embodied existence in the everydayness of the life-world (Varela et al., 1993, 234).

It is essential to see how denying ultimate foundations and groundings is not to deny that our experience and world have their "ultimate truth or goodness." On the contrary, denying ultimate foundations involves the recognition of the ultimate truth and goodness of the human experience and of our world. Thus, the denial of ultimate groundings does not provide an escape route from the ultimate truth and goodness of the human experience and of our world. If we associate absence of groundings with absence of ultimate truth or goodness, it is because of our entanglement with the "extremes of absolutism and nihilism" and our inability to recognize the practical relevance of the "possibilities inherent in mindful," broad-minded attitude to the human experience. These extremes of absolutist and nihilist thoughts cause us to deviate from the lived world; as regards absolutism, we are lead into wanting to evade experience by raising and calling up foundations to furnish our lives with sensibility for "justification and purpose;" as regards nihilism, unable to find the desired foundations or groundings, we are lead into denying the possibility of dealing with the experiences of our everydayness in "liberating and transformative" ways (Varela et al., 1993, 235).

Varela and his colleagues, Thompson and Rosch, continue the Merleau-Pontyian project, in the sense that he inspires and guides their orientation. With Merleau-Ponty, they insist that Western science requires that we conceive of the human body as being at once a physical structure and a "lived, experiential" structure, an outer-inner ensemble, at once a biological-phenomenological unit. These faces of our embodied existence are evidently not in opposition to each other. There is, rather, an ongoing reciprocity or mutual exchange among them. Merleau-Ponty establishes the impossibility of comprehending this reciprocity unless we do an elaborate study of how knowing, cognizing, and experiencing are embodied (Varela et al., 1993, xv-xvi). For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as for Varela and his colleagues, our embodied existence has this dual sense of the body; first, as that we live, the structure of our experience, and second, as the locus of the mechanisms of our cognition.

Given that embodiment in the aforementioned double sense has been missing in the sciences of the mind, and because of the impossibility of any meaningful investigation of this reciprocity between the sciences of the mind and human experience unless one concentrates and focuses on this double sense of our embodied existence, Varela and his colleagues turn to Merleau-Ponty. They insist that the evolution of research in the sciences of the mind as well as the importance and significance of this research to our lived experience (how it bears on our everydayness) make it necessary that we explicitly thematize this twofold sense of being body.

Even as they turn to Merleau-Ponty for inspiration, they acknowledge differences between today's world and the Zeitgeist of the epoch in which Merleau-Ponty's project was born. Firstly, the Merleau-Pontyian project spanned between 1940 and 1960 when the fields of study that today make up cognitive science were but autonomous disciplines that neither shared their ideas/findings nor coordinated their research. In our day, the cognitive sciences have emerged as an interdisciplinary field embracing all these fields and more, namely, linguistics, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, artificial intelligence. Added to these is the invention of the digital computer and other forms of cognitive technologies. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty's analysis and treatment of the life-world of human experience was from a philosophico-

phenomenological perspective (Varela et al., 1993, xvi). The various contemporary disciplines that borrow a leaf from the phenomenological method do so primarily paying allegiance to their "parent disciplines;" either they are articulating philosophy logically (logic: as with Bourdieu (1989), Derrida (1967), and Foucault (1973)), or they are analyzing historical and sociological events interpretatively (ethnology/ethno-methodology), or they are aiming at a therapeutic handling of pathological cases (clinical psychology).

Even at that (even with this partial engagement with phenomenology), phenomenology continues to be merely another school in philosophy with little or no influence in the cognitive sciences. Thus, Varela and his colleagues call for an entirely different route to the effectuation of the Merleau-Pontyean project, and they themselves proffer an innovational "lineage of descent" from the two-fold embodiment that Merleau-Ponty articulated (Varela et al., 1993, xvii).

Incorporating this understanding of our double embodiment into our scientific examination of the mind is of fundamental relevance to our commonplaceness. For, more than any other aspect of the human endeavor, scientific findings and pronouncements not only come with unrivalled authoritative seals, but also conclusions drawn there-from are incarnated in "technological artefacts." The artefacts of cognitive science, the intelligent machines, are already transforming our everydayness in a manner unrivalled by activities in any other field or discipline: philosophy, sociology, psychiatry (Varela et al., 1993, xvii).

Hence, because the condition of the subject of cognition has direct implications for how we live and understand ourselves, as the foregoing makes evident, it becomes a matter of cardinal importance, rather than a mere theoretical exercise. Of course, for Varela, this self is basically "fragmented" (Varela et al., 1993, xvii). Varela and his colleagues recognize efforts in cognitive science at addressing this science-experience relation, for instance, those relying on the computational model of mind, but they also express dissatisfaction with both their "procedures and their answers." They argue that their style of study at both the theoretical and empirical levels is "limited and unsatisfactory," given the absence of any un-mediated, practical attitude towards experience that needs to complement the scientific apparatus. The fallout, they complain, is that those dimensions of our experiential structure that express our spontaneity and reflection are only considered in passing.

To redress and remedy this unpleasant state of affairs, Varela and his colleagues appeal to the experience built up in Buddhism, where "meditative practice" combines with "pragmatic, philosophical exploration." Even as it is not as familiar as its Western counterpart, psychoanalysis, the selflessness and non-unification, 'decenteredness' in its notion of "cognitive being" that is at the basis of Buddhism, could help remedy the problematic totalitarianism and egocentricism in much of Western thought. What is more, this notion is essentially a "firsthand experiential account," coming from people who have reached a level of mindfulness of their everydayness (Varela et al., 1993, xviii).

The Buddhist practice of meditative mindfulness/awareness is a method of enquiring into experience. Its aim is to make one mindful, to make one experience what one's mind is doing as it is doing it, to enable the practitioner "be present with" his mind. It is a practice that to an extent informs the Buddhist no-self and non-dualism teachings. Varela believes the no-self doctrine can lend some support to a better comprehension of the notion of the fragmentation of

the self in the cognitivist and connectivist theories of the Western thought. The Buddhist doctrine of non-dualism can also be placed side by side with the belonging together of the mind-body in Merleau-Ponty and the notion of "cognition as enaction" in Varela. Besides, cognitive science will find in this Buddhist method of meditative practice a method with which to explore and know human experience (Varela et al., 1993, 21-23).

Hence, Varela and his colleagues attempt to link mind as it is conceived in science and mind as it is lived through in experience by formulating a communicative and mutual exchange between the western sciences of the mind and the "meditative psychology" in buddhist thought. In this way they intend to create room for a better appreciation of a relationship of reciprocity between cognitive science and human experience, and also to engender in science the "transformative possibilities" that are part of our commonplaceness (Varela et al., 1993, xviii-xix). On the one hand, science functions and moves ahead due to its practical connection with the world of phenomena. On the other hand, the "meditative practice" functions due to its "systematic and disciplined" connection with life's/man's everydayness. The capacity of this practice for a progressive transformation of our "lived experience and self-understanding" validates it.

Varela and his colleagues examine the computational model and conclude that cognitive science reveals the non-unity, non-unified nature, of the subject of cognition. They also investigate in what way the bit-by-bit blossoming and actualization of a non-unified self becomes the under-structure of the Buddhist tradition of meditation and the way it is psychologically articulated. They also demonstrate how phenomena we commonly ascribe to selves spring up in the absence of real selves. In cognitive science, this phenomenon is associated with the idea of "self-organization and emergent properties of cognitive processes." In the psychology articulated by the Buddhist meditative culture, it refers to the "emergent structure of mental factors" in one experiential instant and to the situation where over an extended period, thanks to karma, a certain cause-effect relation that patterns our experience emerges (Varela et al., 1993, xix).

In what Varela and his colleagues designate as an "enactive program," they challenge the dominant claim in cognitive science that cognition is about representing a world that does not depend on our "perceptual and cognitive" powers, by a cognitive apparatus whose existence does not depend on the world. In its place they propose and sketch a cognitive set-up where cognizing is but an "embodied action" and has no ultimate ground beyond its embodied history. Dismissing the idea of evolution as an "optimal adaptation," and replacing it with the notion of evolution as "natural drift," they place their idea of embodied cognition within an evolutionary framework.

Varela and his colleagues place the existential and philosophical imports of their contention that cognition has no ultimate ground beyond its embodied history within the global (larger) picture of the present-day Western critical review of objectivist and foundationalist thinking. To argue their position, they enlist the support of the non-foundationalist thought of the Mahayana Buddhist School, Madhyamika. They then begin a discourse, wherein they undertake an experience-mind exploration in a broadened horizon that comprises both meditatively attending to experience in our everydayness and scientifically attending to "mind in nature."

The motivation for the aforementioned discourse is the worry that if we do not incorporate the import and significance of the experience of our everydayness, the energy (might) and sophisticated nature of present-day cognitive science could engender a divisive scientific tradition that could drive a wedge between the way we conceive of life and mind in science and the way we understand ourselves in our everydayness, i.e., in our lived-experienced. This would create an artificial situation of irreconcilability between otherwise two aspects of a single reality. Varela and his colleagues maintain that the issues involved here, even as they are "scientific and technical," cannot be without grave ethical implications. These ethical concerns may lead us to a new understanding of the dignity of the human being and of the human life (Varela et al., 1993, xx).

It does seem that Merleau-Ponty and Varela share similar ethical concerns. Whereas Merleau-Ponty calls for a recognition of the mystery of incarnation, Varela and his colleagues cry out for a recognition of the dignity of the human life. Varela and his colleagues insist that the mindfulness culture and its ethical import are of invaluable importance to the contemporary world. They point to the intense "discovery of groundlessness" in the Western culture, both in the fields of sturdy concerned with human ideas and behaviour (humanities), and in the scientific and societal fields, as well as in the "uncertainties" of the day-to-day individual existence of the citizenry. The panacea widely adopted is to come up with "new grounding" (or to bring back worn-out grounds).

Alternatively, Varela proposes, the mindfulness/awareness culture offers a radically brand-new solution. It is a culture where one is mindful of his life-world experiences. This Buddhist tradition provides us with a case study that reveals how, when adopted and kept to its logical consequence, the upshot of groundlessness is an "unconditional sense of intrinsic goodness" that makes itself evident in the world as "spontaneous compassion."

Varela and his colleagues, hence, believe that the "sense of nihilistic alienation" in Western civilization will not be solved by attempting to come up with new grounding; it would rather be solved, they hold, by discovering a disciplined and honest way of pursuing groundlessness, a way of going farther into groundlessness. Given the leading position science has in the Western cultural setting, the scientific community must be part of this quest (Varela et al., 1993, 253).

Despite the fact that contemporary Western scientific culture again and again counteracts our belief in an "ultimate ground," they argue, we persist in trying to obtain one. This dilemma is as much a problem for philosophy as it is for ethics, politics, and religion. We express this tendency of wanting and presuming the capacity to understand and explain everything not only at the individual level in fixating on "ego-self" but also at the collective level in "fixation on racial or tribal self-identity." We also express it in attempting to grasp in order to find a ground for some territorial separation of a group from the other or in comprehending as a ground for a group's appropriation of a territory as belonging to it, i.e., as being its exclusive preserve.

One cannot but appreciate Varela's concern that such a culture of division once cultivated and imbibed could extend beyond the science-experience irreconcilability to take on a wider (global) application/import, which could create not only a divisive thought pattern but also a divisive pattern of human relation, locally and globally, where division and irreconcilability (being scientific facts) become a life option or even a life pattern.

Varela and his colleagues rightly insist that the “idolatry” of the assumption of not only the existence of some ground but also of the possibility of appropriating this ground as “one’s own" recognizes the being of the other solely in an entirely adversarial, "exclusionary" sense. On the contrary, realizing “groundlessness as non-egocentric responsiveness” involves the affirmative acknowledgement of the other person as someone "with whom we dependently originate.” Building and living in this our universe requires learning to root out and dispense with the “grasping tendency,” particularly in its “collective manifestations.”

One couldn’t agree more with Varela here even if one does not completely accept his theory of groundlessness. As already indicated the unreasonable urge in Western civilization to proffer an explanation for practically everything, even when there is nothing to explain and when, but for the one doing the explanation, everyone else knows that what is being accounted for has no connection with the explanation being advanced, makes Varela’s proposal of groundlessness with its attendant positive acknowledgement and inclusiveness of the other not only genuine but timely. This acknowledgement of the “other only in a purely negative, exclusionary way” that Varela and his colleagues attribute to assuming there is a ground and appropriating that ground for one’s self, has a wider significance and consequence that, as they acknowledge, extends to philosophy, ethics, politics, and religion. It is hard not to admit that this thought pattern is itself to say the least part of the cause of the feeling of a sense of alienation and groundlessness in most advanced cultures of the world. Spreading like cancer, it begins with the denial of the goodness of the neighbor who cannot prove his goodness beyond reasonable doubt, and extends to things divine that incidentally in their nature cannot be rationally accounted for, which makes them easy prey, then it spreads to distant peoples who may not even be available to begin to give reasonable account of their humanity, finally it returns to the self and metamorphoses into a sense of meaninglessness and emptiness and worthlessness.

Alternatively, the sense of interdependence that “groundlessness as non-egocentric responsiveness” brings about, engenders the indispensable value of coexistence that is virtually nonexistent or that is becoming extinct in most of modern civilization, but which is a prerequisite for any genuine and healthy sense of self, individually or collectively. There is indeed a sense in which a positive affirmation and a favorable recognition of the other (her existence, worth, value, humanity), without demanding that the other should first make sense to one as a prerequisite, is equally a positive affirmation and a favorable acknowledgment of oneself. There is, then, some sense in the understanding that one is because others are, an understanding that not only benefits the other but also profits one, since it contributes to one’s own sense of value and meaningfulness, and shields one from beginning that downward drift into a sense of worthlessness, or unfruitful emptiness and meaninglessness.

Varela and his colleagues rightly maintain that we learn to incorporate into science the idea of “groundlessness as compassion,” when we broaden our horizon to admit of dealing with our experiences in ways that transform rather than impoverish us, particularly those that do not advocate escaping from the world or discovering a certain concealed, “true self” but in ways that liberate our everyday experience and commonplace world from the clutches of a mind that wants to comprehend everything, a mind that claims the ability to explain all, or that presumes it can account for ultimate grounds. Thus, the Buddhist culture offers modern civilization and science the tools to follow up on their premises with appreciable consistency up to the stage

where foundational grounds would not be needed and desired anymore, enabling the wider tasks of molding, shaping and living in "worlds without ground" (Varela et al., 1993, 254).

4.0 EVALUATING VARELA AND MERLEAU-PONTY

One couldn't agree more with Varela's analysis of the belonging-together of mind and experience, using the Buddhist mindfulness. Should anyone suppose that the Buddhist mindfulness/awareness practice is a mere theoretical concept, he had better try out the biblical way of the Good Samaritan. There does seem to be some parallels between the compassionate interest in others associated with the Buddhist mindfulness practice and the compassionate involvement with others expressed in the Christian good Samaritan teaching/attitude. In both, theory and practice come together. In each, a way of life is described and recommended to the practitioner or the faithful. Thus Varela's middle way (between absolutism and nihilism) and his resolution of the mind-body divide deserve our respect.

However, compared to Varela's involvement with philosophy and science, the singularity of the Merleau-Pontyian entryway and methodology cannot but be glaringly obvious. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological middle course articulates a midway between instrumentalism and biological realism. Even as he accounts for the uniqueness of human intentionality, he acknowledges the implications of an evolutionary consideration of life. In contrast to Varela, Merleau-Ponty's rational account of the paradoxical nature of the biology of totality gives priority to man's embodied experience, but continues to insist on its continuity with the organisms of the lower order.

Although Varela's explanation of life as a "network of selfless selves" comes very close to Merleau-Ponty's paradox of totality, Varela's network of selfless selves gets stuck in the biological, when compared to the notion of totality that Merleau-Ponty discovers in the biological sciences. For Varela, an organism is a dialectic where, in and through a process that produces in that very process a world proper to it, a "living system makes itself into an entity distinct from its environment." Varela's central concern is to justify biologically this state of affairs and to highlight its epistemological implications. Notably, the word dialectic describes, for him, properties whose relation to one another is such that none can exist without the other, and they obtain their properties from their relation to each other, and the evolution of their properties results from their interpenetration. The organism/self-relation is an overlapping of two dialectics; the one is the mechanism of the organism-self-identity; the other, a dialectic of the organism-its-world relational mode (Varela, 1991, 79).

The dialectic of the identity of the living (organism) and its world is one of a self-producing system, involving a reciprocal causality between the living and its world. It is a dialectic where local components and the global whole join together in a reciprocal relation where the living constitutes itself into an entity, a unity that detaches itself "from its background." In generating a world that is proper to it, through its self-producing processes, though, the living takes the upper hand in this relationship of reciprocal causality. This self-organizing, self-producing system eliminates the opposition between the component elements (as in mechanist reductionism) and global properties (as with holist vitalism) (Varela, 1991, 84).

Each one of the diversity of "regional selves" that make up Varela's scaffolding of selves has a certain manner of "self-constitution," but it is as a group that they form an organism, and the

identity that results from these levels of selves is a movement rather than a substance. The regional selves include the basic level cellular self or minimal unity, the bodily self as it develops immunologically, the cognitive perceptuo-motor self-related to animal behaviour, the socio-linguistic self, and the collective social multi-individual totality (Varela, 1991, 80).

The passage to the cognitive level takes place within the matrix of a behavioural entity rather than at the level of an entity bounded in space, as in the fundamental cellular self. The cognitive self is a coherence, a perceptuo-motor unit in space; it is "sensor-motor invariances" occasioned by an interneuron meshwork, in a sort of "neuro-logic" of the nervous system. The organism via its own self-generated activity, makes itself into a "distinct entity in space," and yet remains coupled to that environment that corresponds to it (its world), even as it continues to be distinct from it. The cognitive self is that distinct coherent self that in and through the very process by which it constitutes itself, brings about a configuration of a perceptuo-motor external world (Varela, 1991, 94).

Varela describes selfless self as a "coherent global pattern" arising from "simple local components," which, though not centrally located, gives the impression of being so, and yet remains crucial as an interactional level for the behaviour of the entire unity (Varela, 1991, 95). He believes that starting from the elemental tiers of life and body right up to our entire everydayness, we share the same motif of identity and coupling. Realizing that there is this shared motif, that the very same motif persists and continues, will help us refrain from breaking up the multiple selves we find in organisms into detached categories and hence desist from the tendency to split "what is a totality ranging from cells to social minds" into isolated, independent and fragmented domains (Varela, 1991, 102).

Varela's handicap remains his undue emphasis on the biological, though. Besides, Varela and Merleau-Ponty hold differing accounts of intentionality. Varela makes intentionality a characteristic of the primary cognitive tier of selfhood rather than reserving it for the human mind or for a certain emergence of higher order. Intentionality for him, then, emerges out of an organism-environment coupling. It arises when an organism actively selects a world, namely, a part of the environment with a specific relevance to it, an Umwelt. For this organism-environment coupling to happen, the organism must first embrace the encounters that happen from its own perspective. In a "behavioural entity" the passage to a cognitive form will coincide with the production of "surplus signification," which serves the continuation of life. This basic level of the "cognitive self" ushers in an organism-environment "double dialectic" akin to the Merleau-Pontyian self-movement-transcendence coupling.

For both Merleau-Ponty and Varela, the organism's self-movement not only transmutes its internal lack (its condition as a primordial want) into that which propels its self-preservation/continuation in existence but also it opens up the organism to the overabundance of the Umwelt where it encounters the potentials whereon his continuation in existence hinges. The cognitive self must continue to fill up its organic and structural want of meaning in the face of never-ending dislocations in its progressive perceptual and motor existence. Cognition is taking action regarding what is lacking, it is closing up the loophole from the viewpoint of a cognitive self. Here Varela comes so close to the Merleau-Pontyian notion of life as what is not (yet) within what there is (being) (see Varela, 1991, 99).

Be it as it may, in privileging this basic level of the cognitive self, Varela departs significantly from Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty attempts to make out the significance and relevance of biology for philosophy by developing the phenomenology-ontology intertwining from the behaviour-morphology link. Varela, for his part, focusing on the organism as a purely biological given that is obtained from the identity-coupling twofold dialectic, remains squarely on the scientific empirical plain. Despite his struggles to be faithful to the specificity and uniqueness of the specifically human, through his endeavors to beef up, reinforce, and improve on this elementary tier of biological selfhood, Varela is still hindered by his over-accentuation of the continuity or persistence of the biological across the various levels there are.

Alternatively, for Merleau-Ponty, that very human body that has a biological emergence is the dynamic site of a coming-together of phenomenality and being. For, only in man is there a coming-together of the Leib as a dimension of being and the phenomenological Erlebnis (in the preferred terminology of Husserl) of the Leib as a dimension of being. For it is not only that the Lieb is a dimension of being, but also the human being himself experiences the Leib as a dimension of being. The Leib alone is at once itself and experiences and knows itself as the Erlebnis of being. The implication of this is that the being-of-one-piece of phenomenality and being is a replication, if you will, of the leap expressed and implied in the transformation of the physicochemical into the living. Even as it is not supra-biological, this being-of-one-piece cannot be explained solely within the explanatory framework of the emergence of the biological.

It is against this backdrop that it makes sense to argue that Varela can hardly offer us anything more than an observational explanation of a living being that, of necessity, requires an operational account. This is the case even as it is about a human being whose biological endowment affords him the linguistic tool to make himself autonomous vis-à-vis his basic cognitive self. What is needed is an account that emerges from the operation of the first person rather than one than proceeds from the observation of a third person. What Varela's methodology produces, however, is a theory of knowledge of the living being, which explains the identity and coupling an organism needs to ensure its continued existence.

Alternatively, with Merleau-Ponty we get to a phenomenology of the living being that recognizes the philosophical import of the epistemology of life that Varela's approach develops, namely, that man's first-person-being status means that the mind-body and environment-world couplings as of necessity implies that there is the phenomenological in the ontological and the ontological in the phenomenological.

However, Varela and his colleagues make the point that though their enactive cognitive science and pragmatism are theoretic and do not show us how to dwell in a world without foundations, in the Buddhist tradition, for instance the Madhyamika tradition, the practice of egolessness makes the lived world accessible to us as a place for realizing living in a world devoid of foundations/grounds. The Buddhist master, Nagarjuna, expresses this splendidly when he notes that we cannot teach ultimate truth except in the context of "everyday practices." He also observes that we do not obtain freedom (nirvana) unless we understand ultimate truth (Kalupahana, 1986, XXIV: 10).

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