Structural Convergence: Barthes and Buddhism

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As a manifestation of Heidegger's question of the "ontic priority of Being," structuralism posits not an answer, but a methodology to isolate the nature of Being—the grounds for existence—by dissecting lived experience and rendering it comprehensible to the human intellect. The fundamental distinction in Structuralism lies between the signifier and the signified, introduced by the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. This view divides experience into two broad categories, the human constructed representation (the signifier) and the real phenomenon it represents (the signified). They necessarily exist in conjunction, but there is an essential difference between the two. While both are grounded in Being, only the signified phenomenon partakes of Being simply, without the interpolations of the signifier. The existence of the signifier, on the other hand, is interpenetrated with subjective values and meanings that operate apart from Being. With this view, the Structuralists have developed, I will argue, a corollary to the doctrine of the Mahayana philosopher Nāgārjuna distinction between supreme truth and conventional truth, where the signified phenomenon is a manifestation of supreme truth and the signifier one of conventional truth. Kurzweil (1980), for example, claims that structuralism exists in "a silent space that 'both speaks and is absolute’"; that it deals in matters of speech and convention as much as it does in truth and silence and has as its object the point of convergence between these two truths (Olson 2005, 167). Since all meanings originate in the signifier, it follows that the signified is intrinsically meaningless; the diversity of meaning hangs on a plurality of interpretations, not of objects. Structuralism heralds a shift in western thought that does not require any intrinsic meaning of Being, while preserving a coherent ontology. The relational character of this ontology bears striking similarities to the ontological first principles of Buddhist philosophy. By extension, this common ground with respect to Being suggests the potential harmony between the two systems of thought with respect to ethics as well.
A critical concern in this analysis is the validity of using the structuralist activity, one that involves a deep relationship with the subject undertaking the activity, to make any claims about the essential nature of the universe. This subjective turn makes structuralism rather susceptible to a relativist critique, i.e. that it bottoms out in solipsism. In answer to this criticism, it is helpful to reconsider the relationship between Nāgārjuna’s concepts of supreme truth and conventional truth. In *The Fundamentals of the Middle Way*, Nāgārjuna notes that the “highest sense [of the truth] is not taught apart from conventional truth, and without having understood the highest sense one cannot achieve liberation” (Olson 2005, 208). The necessary coincidence of the supreme truth and conventional truth recalls the necessary conjunction of the signifier and the signified, which we will tentatively refer to as the simulacrum, a concept discussed at greater length below. The fact of Being simply is fundamental to any simulacrum. Thus, no matter the roots of the structuralist activity, it, like everything else, shares in the ubiquity of supreme truth or the absolute; meaning that this truth can be found in every phenomena as well as its representation both alongside and as its conventional shroud. Nāgārjuna is emphatic about the primacy of this interdependency: “There is no difference whatever between cyclic existence and nirvana; and there is nothing whatever that distinguishes *nirvāṇa* from cyclic existence” (Olson 2005, 212). It follows that it would be unwise to hurriedly turn towards hard distinctions between an objective, static reality over and against an arbitrary subject—so far as the possibility of truth hangs on knowing, and the subject is the only means of knowing the object, the analysis of this intractable relationship with a view to excavating its truth emerges as the principle concern of both Nagarjuna and the Structuralists.

The French Structuralist Roland Barthes developed Saussure’s linguistic structuralism into an approach to all lived phenomena, effectively universalizing Saussure’s theory of language. Barthes argues that all things possess a symbolic value, that reality itself is a simulacrum or composed of simulacra, which are themselves composed of signifiers and signifieds. In *The Structuralist Activity*, Barthes lays out his structuralist methodology, consisting primarily of two complementary processes: first “dissection” and then “articulation”. With dissection, one breaks down the phenomenon into fragments, where each is similar enough to be a member of the set constituting the same phenomenon, but different enough to warrant holding them apart. To Barthes, these fragments have no intrinsic meaning; meaning only arises from the second process, articulation, which organizes the fragments into a system of relationships that aims to reconstruct the original
phenomenon intelligibly and with fidelity (Barthes 1979, 313). This
dual process might be described as the process of signification, the
generation of the intractable pairs of signifier and signified; it produces
simulacra, which we may now define as the representations of
phenomena made intelligible by and for the human mind. From the
simulacrum, the scientist can draw conclusions about the nature of the
phenomenon, though the validity of these conclusions is contingent on
the accuracy of the representation. Barthes notes, however, that this
process is invariably subjective, suggesting that the simulacrum’s
meaning, “Is man himself, his situation, his freedom, and the very
resistance which nature offers to his mind” (312). How, then, can a
simulacrum ever effectively capture the reality of the phenomenon? Is a
“structuralist truth” a *contradictio in adjecto*? To answer this seeming
paradox, it is necessary to look at the implicit claims undergirding the
structuralist activity.

For one, it is not the fragments that possess any meaning, but the
relationships between fragments in the simulacrum that generates
meaning. Yet, even this meaning depends on the relationship of the
observer to the simulacrum. Ultimately, these meanings are a product of
the discriminating mind that, by defining the fragment as part of the
whole posits a priori some degree of intrinsic, independent existence to
the fragment that makes it distinct from others. By narrowing the scope
past the fragment, it is easy to see that even they are dependent on the
relationship between their parts in an infinite series of aggregation that
runs parallel to the potentially infinite series of dissection implied by
the structuralist methodology described above. The sentence is a useful
metaphor: Any complete sentence is a simulacrum of some real or
imagined event dependent upon the order of the individual words for
meaning, while the individual words are themselves dependent upon the
relationship between letters for their particular meanings. There are two
possibilities for the continuation of this metaphor: either the dissection
resolves at the point of letters, an essentialist account, or the letters
themselves are susceptible to dissection into parts by way of further
genealogy. This point of divergence is crucial: in the former, the letters
must possess some degree of intrinsic value that makes them
irreducible, while in the latter, this value is relational. But how does one
dissect a letter? If a language evolves over time, then in reality, the letter
is a product of its historical relationship to other letters over time—as
determined by its usage and the evolution of this usage by the speakers
of the language. Thus, my usage of the letter “b” depends on how those I
have associated with historically have used the letter “b”, and so on back
to the original instance in which the letter “b” or its predecessor was
required. Consequently, this dependency is all that constitutes the
existence of a phenomenon: in the words of the Dalai Lama (2005), “if something is fundamentally dependent, by logical necessity it must be devoid of having a nature that is independent” (30).

None of this invalidates the structuralist activity; it only nuances it such that it should never include a fragment that is assumed to possess an intrinsic existence—in fact, the primacy of relationship in Structuralism requires there not to be a fragment with intrinsic existence as this would compromise the accuracy of the simulacrum, so far as this accuracy is determined by the relationships contained therein as opposed to the units used to measure them. Ultimately, the fundamental constituent of the structuralist activity is the bundle of relationships represented by the fragments in the simulacrum. In this way, following a legacy based in the renewed interest in ontological questions inspired by Heidegger and others, Structuralism aims to build ontology around relationships without the necessity of an intrinsically meaningful essence. Furthermore, mathematical structuralists have more recently used theoretical frameworks like non-foundational set-theory to argue that systems do not necessarily require the presence of an intrinsically existing, irreducible unit to uphold the structure of the system, or for our purposes, ontology. For instance, Priest (2009) concludes that the fragments of a system very easily function as “relation-instances”, or loci in a field of relationships, and that these loci are themselves “sets of relation-instances” (474). This relational ontology posits a universe of infinite complexity, and a simulacrum that operates from such a principle will never erroneously posit an intrinsically existing thing, a thing-in-itself. Meaning and value derives instead from the interdependency of tentatively defined parts, not the parts themselves. To borrow an image from the Buddhist tradition, it is erroneous to consider any thing as anything more than a jewel in Indra’s Net whose existence is entirely determined by the way in which it reflects those jewels surrounding it, past to present and on all sides. The Hevajra Tantra, a significant Tibetan Buddhist text from the 7th century C.E., asserts that the “diversity of existence [is] the Process of Emanation,” suggesting that the very march of time is born out of the infinite variety of relationships blossoming out of other relationships, emanating like a light (231). These considerations have a particular significance with respect to the concept of the self: Does it contain an intrinsic existence, or is it simply another codependent phenomenon arising from others? Barthes affirms the former in his analysis of the author, concluding that:
The author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a ‘subject’, not a ‘person’, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together’, suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it (Barthes 1977, 145).

From his understanding of the relational existence of all phenomena, Barthes turned his criticism towards the idea of the self, with the distinct realization that the self is itself only a phenomenon, a relation-instance. In *The Death of the Author* (1977), Barthes presents a work of literary theory with an aim to describe life, noting that “life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred” (147). This “tissue of signs” recalls the understanding of existence as an aggregate of infinitely complex relationships up to the instance of the book, or more broadly, up to the instance of life. This notion of aggregation resonates well with the Buddhist concept of no-self, wherein the self is actually the sum of five *skandhas*: matter, feelings or sensations, perceptions, mental constituents, and consciousness (Olson 2005, 14). Additionally, the *skandhas* are by definition “aggregates” or “bundles”, i.e. the product of an infinite series of relationships: matter is composed of the relationship between atoms; sensations are composed of the relationship between the body, the phenomenon, and past experiences of similar phenomena, and so on.

If the self is composed of the *skandhas*, then the self is itself a phenomenon as the loci of relation-instances between the *skandhas*. Indeed, the Dalai Lama (2005) explains that the “self can be understood only as a dependent phenomenon contingent upon physical and mental skandhas” (91). This removes any exceptional status from the notion of the self, a conclusion that Barthes comes to through his development of Structuralism, noting that “everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed…at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath” (1977, p. 147). This nothingness at the heart of the structure is crucial as it unites the logic of Structuralism with the logic of Buddhism: the primary and fundamental interdependency of all things requires the intrinsic emptiness of all things. Considering that both Structuralism and Buddhism are separate attempts at unmasking the nature of being, each with its own method, their convergence is striking, and perhaps most evident in the “The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtrā (*Prajnaparamita Sūtrā*), a short text explaining the intrinsic emptiness of all things. It states that, “even
the 5 aggregates (skandhas) are empty of intrinsic existence,” which the Dalai Lama (2005) elaborates on, noting that, “even emptiness itself is devoid of intrinsic existence” (84). The apparent contradiction of these kinds of statements is diminished by giving the relations between being priority over the beings themselves. Nevertheless, the tacit implications of Barthes’ structuralism also rest at the foundation of the relational Buddhist ontology.

To reverse temporarily the logic of this analysis, and claim that Buddhism simply posits a particular simulacrum of the universe, reveals a unique tension in this account. One might argue that, as structuralism aims to be comprehensive of all simulacra, and Buddhism is but one among these, that structuralism supersedes Buddhism, and is subversive of Buddhist claims to truth. Previously, it was noted that the validity of a simulacrum depends on the fidelity of its representation. Thus, to establish any order of rank between structuralism and Buddhism requires a means of evaluating the fidelity of their respective representations of truth. The previously discussed consilience between Buddhism and Barthes’ structuralism suggests that Buddhism is, on level, at least as comprehensive as Barthes’ structural account. Nevertheless, the simulacrum does not only exist at the level of representation, it extends further to the implications of its arrangement; namely what it means for things to be arranged in such a way. This heritage emerges from the inextricable nature of the signifier and the signified. The meanings ascribed to the simulacrum are always attributable to the signifier, which is an outgrowth of the subjective mind conditioned by language. It follows that these meanings are an aspect of conventional truth; meaning is true only conditionally. Consequently, the meanings that Buddhists assign to the ontology of emptiness arise from conventional understandings of an inherited lexicon of meanings—they very well may not be valid in terms of the supreme truth.

Barthes’ presentation of the simulacrum provides an opportunity to scrutinize this problem more closely. If a simulacrum necessarily partakes of both supreme truth and conventional truth, then it is possible that meanings in the simulacrum are rooted in supreme truth. The determining factor in this arrangement is whence these meanings ultimately come. There are two possibilities in terms of the actual configuration of the simulacrum, either from the fragments or from their relationships. If it were to focus on the fragments, then the meanings attached give the fragments an intrinsic, self-evident nature. An example of this is the concept of God in Christianity; He saturates the universe, is omniscient, provides the basis for human exceptionalism, and generally lies at root of all things. These premises
justify the Christian ethos built around them, and, as a result, construct a simulacrum that is founded on discrete self-existent fragments, e.g. the soul. On the other hand, Buddhism, as mentioned before, conditions a simulacrum centered on the relationships between fragments in a mode similar to Barthes. In both cases, the meanings built into the simulacrum are anthropogenic, conventionally based. However, a simulacrum focused on fragments, one that a priori grants them an intrinsic existence in-itself, incorporates into its very foundation a contradiction—it works against the underlying supreme truth that is also central to its existence. That is to say, positing a thing-in-itself as the grounds for Being distorts the fidelity of the simulacrum, so far as we hold essential emptiness to be true, as is the case in both Buddhism and Barthes’ structuralism. From a Buddhist perspective, this breed of contradiction is the root cause of suffering, and the only way around it is to change the locus of the simulacrum away from an ontology of discrete beings towards one that revolves around the constitutive relationships between these now-empty empty fragments. While Buddhism is not the only example of this type of ontology, it is archetypal of its functioning. Since the Buddhist ethic centers on the intrinsic emptiness of all phenomena, it follows that its ethic is at least void of a fundamental contradiction that causes the misappropriation of ethics and its attendant suffering. Fortunately, Structuralism provides a similar ontology, which means that it is conducive to a similar, non-contradictory ethic; though Barthes did not, it seems, put himself to this task.

Ultimately, Barthes’ structuralist insights are, in the main, ontological or purely theoretical, lending little to the task of practical judgment. For the sake of comparison, these two poles are reflected in the bipartite conjunction of “wisdom” and “skillful-means” in Vajrayana philosophy. Wisdom generally denotes the profound knowledge of the intrinsic emptiness of all phenomena, while skillful means is the capacity to bring others to an understanding of this wisdom.\(^1\) By exposing the supreme truth of emptiness underlying Structuralism, Barthes lays a foundation for a non-contradictory ethic in the vein of Buddhism. However, he does not do much in the way of developing this ethic. In effect, he focuses solely on the wisdom contained in his philosophy, without extending it to the sphere of practice, or deriving its implications for day-to-day life. The remainder of this discussion will focus on doing just that: building an ethic out of...

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\(^1\) See *The Hevajra Tantra*, translated by D.L. Snellgrove (Olson 2005) for an extended discussion of the relationship between wisdom and skillful means.
structuralism by drawing from Buddhist philosophy, justified as it were by the common ontological premises of both schools of thought.

Given the emptiness of self, and the priority of codependency, this ethic would prioritize compassion for all of the relationships that constitute the presence of the self, which, since these relationships themselves have no origin, implies infinite compassion for an infinite number of associations; which would be established as the highest ethical aim. Second, it should be an imperative to advocate and share this knowledge of emptiness so that it might resolve the ages old human tradition of violence and aggression by virtue of the first criterion. Both of these components are central to Buddhist ethics, especially concerning the path of the Bodhisattva. In the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtrā, the Bodhisattva is one who intends to “lead all beings to nirvana, which leaves nothing behind” (Olson 2005, 168). This task is accomplished only through the knowledge of emptiness, of which the Bodhisattva is a master. The Heart Sūtrā notes further that “due to a bodhisattva’s indifference to any kind of personal attainment he lives as one who has relied solely on the perfection of wisdom”, where the perfection of wisdom is the essential, embodied teaching of emptiness (Olson 2005, 165). Thus, the Bodhisattva is one who frees people from their ignorance of supreme truth, and consequently from their suffering, all the while maintaining a state of no-self throughout. In structuralist terms, the Bodhisattva works to correct individuals’ wrongful belief in a discrete ontology of beings with an intrinsic existence other than emptiness. Largely, this is accomplished by embodying the principle of the alternative fully; embracing in every action the intrinsic emptiness of the universe to cultivate awareness of the total dependency of all things on all other things. In doing so, the Bodhisattva, the ethical person rooted in supreme truth, cultivates understanding of “the nature of suffering from which we wish to free others” and experiences a “deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings” (Dalai Lama 2005, 49). These qualities are at least one possibility for a subjective response to an awareness of the supreme truth of emptiness, an awareness that also makes the ethic fulfill the criteria for a non-contradictory ontology.

Barthes was largely successful in his use of Structuralism to provide a persuasive account of the nature of being. Though his conclusions later caused him to repute even structuralism, there is no fundamental contradiction between an intrinsically empty existence and a structure as he saw it (Prosser 2004, 218). Such a contradiction only arises from a structure that finds in its loci or parts an intrinsically independent essence. This premise is readily apparent in the Heart Sūtrā, which claims that “form is emptiness and emptiness is form; emptiness is not other than form, form is no different from emptiness” (Olson 2005, 163).
The intrinsic emptiness of the universe does not entail chaos; still the universe emerges the way it is, taking on a specific, identifiable form. Ultimately, humans need this form in order to accomplish anything, from ethical decisions to cleaning the house. The unfortunate consequence of this is that in seeking form, humanity gave it essence, casting an illusion where there was none and supplying individuals with false premises from which to act—the illusion of the self, of Divine Judgment, of the necessity of war, the illusion of good and bad nature, and so on. The signifier is the signified by nature, a relationship that is expressed in an infinite number of ways. The structuralist isolates the form of these relationships, opening up the possibility to scrutinize the very substance of our understanding. Barthes especially followed this to its conclusion; that the supreme truth, the Being of all things, is emptiness. It is now, however, an imperative to propagate this knowledge and employ it in the elimination of intrinsic contradiction.

References


