

Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism. Why It Matters to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 376, £ 19.99, ISBN 9780190204341

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This volume is an important cross-cultural analysis of Buddhist thought as relevant for Western contemporary philosophy. It topically arranges the ideas the author finds most useful to talk *with*, not *about*, the Buddhist tradition. Without any presumption about being complete in coverage, he nevertheless focuses on the principal points of engagement of Buddhist thought with Western philosophy. The main purpose of the volume is condensed in the word "Engaging" in the title, a term he systematically uses with all the semantic ranges of the corresponding Sanskrit (*avatāra*) and Tibetan (*'jug pa*) terms: they can mean *engaging with*, *descending*, *proceeding*, or *introduction*. Consequently, the author invites the reader – the scholar of Western philosophy – to take Buddhism seriously, to think through its point of view, to descend from Eurocentric isolation into a multicultural philosophy, to take up a new exploration, to be introduced to Buddhist thought.

The volume shows how Buddhist epistemology, ontology, morality and soteriology are tightly bound to one another, weaving a philosophical reflection which is entirely framed by the problem of suffering. Suffering (*dukkha*) has a cause, which is primal confusion, and a cessation (*nirvāṇa*), which is possible through an epistemological orientation coupled with an ethical one. The author draws on texts from a range of sources in that tradition and presents it in terms of metaphysics, phenomenology, epistemology, logic and ethics.

The chapter that opens the volume and the one that closes it could be read together as a methodological indication, extremely relevant for understanding the nature of the author's cross-cultural challenge. In the dialogue with the Buddhist approach we are dealing with a tradition both authorial and progressive. While on the one hand the Buddhist scholars' commentaries aim to determine the author's intent (from the Buddha onwards), on the other this tradition has evolved in response to influence from other cultures and thoughts from the beginning, from the East and recently also from the West. This philosophy is alive. The author, one of its most well-known contemporary Western

commentators, maintains his suspicion towards engaging in a hermeneutical analysis of the authorial intent, and prefers to contribute to the emergence of multiple and varied meanings from the texts. He includes our contemporary analysis of the tradition as moments *within* it, as the continuation of the critical dialogue with it.

In the second and third chapter the main outlines of Buddhist metaphysics are sketched: interdependence and impermanence in the former, emptiness in the latter. This articulation is aimed at explaining three central thesis on the nature of reality: all phenomena are dependently originated, impermanent and empty of intrinsic nature.

In the second chapter the Western connections and resonances are quickly presented, mainly with the skeptical tradition and its descendants (such as Hume and Wittgenstein). Even though these two topics are already shown as having profound implications for ontology, it is only in the third chapter that these implications weave a complete framework, linked to the theory of the two truths, the conventional (Sanskrit: *samvṛti-satya*, Tibetan: *kun rdzob bden pa*) and the ultimate truths (Sanskrit: *paramārtha-satya*, Tibetan: *don dam bden pa*).

Emptiness is here presented in various expositions; in particular, the *pre-Mahāyāna Abhidharma* doctrine of anti-realism with respect to the macroscopic is very well compared with the *Madhyamaka* extension of it to a global anti-realism. Then the author sketches his view of the *Madhyamaka* paradoxical relation between the two truths and leads the reader towards the *Yogācāra* three-nature theory (*trisvabhāva*) as a kind of explanatory pivot point of that paradox. Quoting mainly Śāntarakṣita and Mipham, the author shows how *Yogācāra* and *Madhyamaka* can be reconciled in a "metaphilosophical synthesis" (p.87) in which the former would provide phenomenology and the latter metaphysics.

The fourth and fifth chapters present some contributions to Buddhist views about the self and the person.

In the former, the author shows how the Buddhist approach emphasizes the ethical, affective and social aspects of the representation of the self to a far greater extent than the Western philosophical tradition. Ethics and affections are not only *consequences* of positing a self, but also *causes* and *dimensions* of it. So the fictitious and illusory identity of "I" (a substantial

ego) and "mine" (my body, my properties), this double self-grasping has profound implications in the ethical view.

The latter, the fifth chapter, addresses a wide range of accounts of consciousness. The author skillfully focuses on the main questions, making the different strands and philosophers (Buddhist scholars and their Western colleagues) interplay. In particular, the issue of self-knowledge and its complex structure is extensively analyzed through reflexive models, higher-order thought models, higher-order perception models and self-luminosity models.

The sixth chapter focuses on the main core of phenomenology: the investigation of the nature and conditions of subjectivity. Buddhist phenomenology is about transforming our way of experiencing the world, from a way that engenders suffering to one that does not. *Yogācāra* phenomenology serves here as the best speaker to dialogue with the Western perspective mainly of Husserl and Heidegger, about the structure of subjectivity. The main question of the chapter is about the possibility of bracketing the external world (that is, not considering the external reality of objects) in order to understand the nature of human experience. Various Buddhist scholars offer different answers, showing how and why we can say that actually we are *not* subjects.

The seventh chapter presents Buddhist epistemology and its central term, *pramāṇa*, a word denoting measurement or degree, and so a sort of measure of reality; it corresponds to its *prameya*, the epistemic object. A presentation of the *pramāṇa* theory in the *Pramāṇavādins* and in the *Mādhyamikas*, regarded as "foundationalists" (p.216) and "coherentists" (*ibidem*) respectively, explains how the aim of eliminating suffering implies the *pramāṇa* and the theory of the two truths, regarded as different kinds of knowledge.

The eighth chapter focuses on Buddhist logic and philosophy of language. On the one hand, language can clinch a doctrinal argument, but on the other it is always associated with reification, conceptuality and universals. Since the ultimate truth is considered to be beyond thought or description, language is deceptive and ultimately inadequate. Then, to solve this paradoxical tension in the nature of language, there is the need of the *catuskoṭi*, presented here as a two-valued logic that allows four possibilities. Among the various topics of the chapter, two more paradoxical tensions are analysed: one, attributed to

Nāgārjuna, about the limit contradiction of language, and one included in Chan/Zen traditions, where there are many discursive references to non-discursive techniques for obtaining realizations. Then, considering the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma for the approach to language that each of them suggests, the author focuses on the third one: the only utility of language is instrumental and causal. It is a tool for social coordination, and the mechanism of reference is then abandoned. The strongest attack to this representational model of language is the *mantra*, in tantric practices: meant to transform the mind with the effect of sound, it is causally efficacious in *making something happen*, as opposed to *conveying meanings*.

The ninth chapter presents Buddhist ethics as a “*moral phenomenology* concerned with the transformation of our experience of the world” (p.279, author’s italics). Here the contribution of the Buddhist approach to the contemporary debates is particularly relevant because, reflecting the theory of interdependence, it sees the boundaries between self and other as illusory. Responsibility is universal; our happiness and suffering are bound up with that of others. Buddhist moral theory has to solve the problem of *dukkha*. It has causes: attraction, aversion and, first of all, confusion regarding the nature of reality. Suffering is perpetuated by our intentions and actions, but we can eradicate its causes. Confusion is a root delusion which is both moral and epistemological, and it produces the vicious attraction and aversion, and so all suffering. Replacing confusion with wisdom allows virtues and liberation from suffering. The author then, presenting the *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* ethical traditions, deepens the link between ethics and the way of seeing things, the awareness of others and the interdependence of phenomena. Ethics is rooted in metaphysics and phenomenology. *Karuṇā* (care) and *bodhicitta* (mind of awakening) become central moral values, benefitting others being the only rational way of engaging in the world – the temptation to reduce Buddhist ethics to consequentialism is then abandoned.

The entire volume is a remarkable dialogue between Western and Buddhist philosophies, two approaches that are close enough to each other that they are mutually intelligible, but distant enough that they have a lot to learn from an interplay. The precious contribution of the volume is to be found in the admirable selection of the main ideas that, in the author’s

opinion, can trigger a beneficial engagement of each of them with the other. About each one of the addressed issues, the reader will find a huge range of debates and alternatives that contribute to a sound cross-cultural philosophical enquiry.