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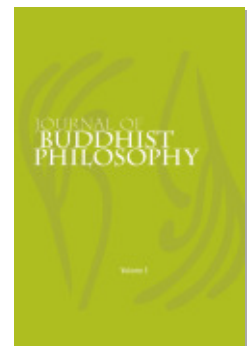
*Illuminating the Mind: An Introduction to Buddhist
Epistemology* by Jonathan Stoltz (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS



Review of Jonathan Stoltz, *Illuminating the Mind: An Introduction to Buddhist Epistemology*

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JONATHAN STOLTZ'S *Illuminating the Mind: An Introduction to Buddhist Epistemology* manages to accomplish two difficult tasks remarkably well: it offers a lucid, systematic, and textually responsible introduction to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's tradition of Buddhist epistemology while at the same time framing the central commitments of this tradition within the context of contemporary epistemology. This book is part of a new series published by Oxford University Press and edited by Jan Westerhoff called, "Buddhist Philosophy for Philosophers," with other coinciding publications treating Buddhist ethics (Jay L. Garfield) and Buddhist metaphysics (Mark Siderits). This series is a welcome and timely contribution to the burgeoning efforts of philosophy departments to diversify their curricula, and Stoltz's volume in particular fills an important lacuna. While there are several reliable introductory books on Buddhist philosophy more generally as well as introductions to non-Buddhist Indic traditions of epistemology (e.g., Phillips 2011), one is hard-pressed to find a monograph-length introduction to Buddhist epistemology accessible to non-specialists and suitable for the philosophy classroom. Stoltz identifies his primary audience as "persons trained in the Western tradition of philosophy," and while it is expertly tailored to this end, this book also has much to offer scholars and students of Buddhist studies (x).

Stoltz organizes the text by central topics in both contemporary Anglo-American epistemology as well as Buddhist philosophy, rather than either taking a historical approach and structuring the text around prominent authors, traditions, or periods or mirroring the topical outlines of classical Buddhist treatises on logic and epistemology. He restricts his subject matter to those topics falling strictly within epistemology understood as the nature and scope of knowledge. This approach entails the omission of certain topics that are classically associated with the Buddhist “Pramāṇavāda” tradition, such as the theory of exclusion (*apoha*), which, as both a theory of concept formation and a semantic theory, Stoltz points out, “is not, at its core, an epistemological thesis” (xi). While one might worry that at least a cursory understanding of *apoha* is necessary for a full appreciation of inferential knowledge and its object in this tradition, there are clear advantages to Stoltz’s demarcation of his subject matter.

The book opens with a chapter introducing core terminology and concepts in Buddhist epistemology. Given the target audience of this book, it may initially seem curious that Stoltz often chooses to leave untranslated the most important such technical term: *pramāṇa*. But this decision derives from his sensitivity to the fact that the meaning of this term does not conform neatly to either of the two families of common translations—(i) “source of knowledge,” “epistemic instrument,” etc., and (ii) “valid cognition,” “reliable cognition,” “veridical cognition,” etc.—owing to the fact that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti understand *pramāṇa* as both a means of knowledge and the resulting cognitive episode of knowledge itself (*pramāṇaphala*). (When Stoltz does translate *pramāṇa*, he uses the phrases “episode of knowledge” or “knowledge episode,” following Matilal 1986.) Succeeding chapters treat the conditions for knowledge, perception, inference, the dispute over the status of testimony as a source of knowledge, ignorance, and skepticism. The final three chapters consider Buddhist epistemology vis-à-vis disputes in contemporary epistemology. Each chapter concludes with a list of recommended sources for further reading on the topic at hand. While focusing primarily on the Indian tradition of Buddhist epistemology, Stoltz also incorporates notable innovations by Tibetan philosophers, a contribution that he is well-positioned to make, building on his prior work on Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge’s epistemology and philosophy of mind (Stoltz 2007, 2013; Hugon and Stoltz 2019).

Though primarily an overview of Buddhist epistemology, this work is in no small part also a comparative project. Stoltz does not simply introduce Buddhist commitments informed by the vocabulary and conceptual frameworks of contemporary epistemology; he explicitly spells out ways in which Buddhist epistemology both differs from and might engage with mainstream views in contemporary epistemology. At the outset, Stoltz flags two significant distinctions between Buddhist epistemology and what

he calls “contemporary analytic epistemology”: (i) contemporary analytic epistemology standardly takes knowledge to be a relation between an epistemic agent and a *proposition*, whereas the content of many paradigmatic cases of knowledge in Buddhist epistemology is *non-propositional* (though propositional knowledge is also accommodated); and (ii) contemporary analytic epistemology ordinarily regards knowledge as (entailed by) a special kind of *belief*, where beliefs are construed as *dispositional states* of an individual that may persist for extended durations, potentially continuing even through states of unconsciousness, while Buddhist epistemology regards knowledge as a special kind of *cognition* (*jñāna*), where a cognition is an occurrent, *momentary episode* that is the result of some causal process. With these distinctions, Stoltz draws attention to how narrow and idiosyncratic a necessarily propositional and dispositional conception of knowledge is, reminding readers that “knowledge can extend beyond the standard propositional cases that have become the bread and butter of twentieth- and twenty-first-century epistemological theorizing” (16).¹ In the subsequent chapter he points out a third important distinction: (iii) on a standard analysis in contemporary epistemology, while a mental state in the form of a belief is a necessary condition for knowledge, knowledge itself is not a mental state; by contrast, in Buddhist epistemology, knowledge itself is a mental state in the form of a cognition (40–41).

Throughout the book, Stoltz makes note of interpretative disputes in contemporary scholarship on Buddhist epistemology, and although he does not weigh in on *all* these areas of disagreement, this work is not an unopinionated textbook. Two important interventions that Stoltz makes in the secondary literature are his critiques of pragmatist and reliabilist interpretations of Buddhist epistemology. Stoltz resists a common interpretation of Dharmakīrti’s theory of knowledge as pragmatic (e.g., Katsura 1984; Powers 1994; Dreyfus 1997; Cabezon 2000), which is often based on Dharmottara’s explanation of Dharmakīrti’s (first) definition of *pramāṇa* as a non-deceptive (*aviśamvādi*) cognition, where he glosses non-deceptive as *arthakriyāsthitiḥ* (PV II.1). As Stoltz argues, it looks unlikely that either Dharmakīrti or Dharmottara took pragmatic success to be *sufficient* for knowledge given that this would leave them unable to rule out cases of epistemic luck, where a cognition is only accidentally correct. Instead, in the post-Dharmakīrti (and particularly the Tibetan) commentarial tradition, Stoltz finds a more satisfactory account of non-deceptiveness as grounded in a cognition’s ability to invariably track the truth (35–36).

Stoltz also pushes back against a second common characterization of Buddhist epistemology as a kind of reliabilism (e.g., Cowherds 2011; Coseru 2012), and specifically as a version of Goldman’s process reliabilism (e.g., Garfield 2015). Since Dharmakīrti’s non-deceptiveness criterion for knowledge “requires a lawlike connection to the truth,” Stoltz insists

that this account “cannot be assimilated to any reliabilist theory in which reliable belief is still fallible,” and as he points out, process reliabilism is generally taken to be a fallibilist theory on which beliefs formed through reliable processes only *tend* to be true rather than false (45, 46). Instead, he argues that it is Williamson’s factive mental state theory of knowledge with which the Dharmakīrtian theory of knowledge has the strongest affinity. It bears noting, however, that spelling out factivity and invariable truth-tracking in relation to Dharmakīrti’s non-deceptiveness criterion for knowledge is a more straightforward enterprise in the case of perceptual knowledge than inferential knowledge, the latter being necessarily erroneous (*bhrānta*) insofar as its objects are mentally constructed concepts.

The final three chapters are in many ways the fruits of the labor of the first seven. It is here where Stoltz makes good on his aim to “*show* readers that the themes addressed (and arguments made) by Buddhist philosophers are just as relevant and incisive as are the themes (and arguments) put forward by philosophers in the Western tradition of philosophy” (viii). In these chapters, he proposes ways in which Buddhist epistemology might productively contribute to conversations in contemporary epistemology. The first concerns anti-luck conditions on knowledge, that is, conditions meant to preclude cases where a cognition is only accidentally correct from counting as knowledge. Here, Stoltz details how twelfth- and thirteenth-century Tibetan epistemologists characterize knowledge episodes as necessarily having a correct “mode of apprehension” (*’dzin stangs*), which he cashes out as counterfactual sensitivity to the truth or sensitivity to the existence of its object, such that: “If state of affairs *p* had been false, cognition *C(p)* would not have occurred” (174). Stoltz next takes up the question of where Buddhist epistemology falls in the internalism vs. externalism debate, that is, the dispute over whether the guarantee of the correctness of a knowledge episode depends on factors solely internal to the cognitive agent or whether it may also depend on external factors. He argues that, like other causal theories of knowledge, Buddhist epistemology is best understood as having an externalist account of epistemic warrant (at least so long as Buddhist epistemologists are wearing their external world realist hats). Finally, Stoltz considers how Buddhist epistemology might weigh in on debates concerning the value of experimental epistemology.

Illuminating the Mind concludes with a case for the value of “cross-cultural epistemology.” Stoltz argues that engaging with a tradition such as Buddhist epistemology can help contemporary epistemologists challenge their own starting assumptions and expose overlooked fundamental distinctions. Scholars of Buddhist studies also stand to benefit from approaching their subject matter informed by contemporary epistemology. This book provides an excellent foundation for promoting precisely this kind of mutually advantageous exchange.

NOTE

1. Stoltz points out that contemporary inquiries that take for granted that all knowledge is propositional are largely out of step with pre-1963 accounts of knowledge, citing the example of Bertrand Russell who held that knowledge comes in two varieties: knowledge of things and knowledge of truths (38).

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