

Book Review

Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why it Matters to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2015, 400pp., \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-19-020434-1 (paperback)

Reviewed by **Rick Repetti**, Department of History, Philosophy & Political Science, Kingsborough Community College, 2001 Oriental Blvd., D-223, Brooklyn, NY 11235, 718-368-5226; Email: rrepetti@kingsborough.edu

Engaging Buddhism is the most impressive, insightful, informative, and accessible book I've ever read on Buddhist philosophy, a subject I've studied for over 40 years, and in this assessment I include both primary and secondary sources, both Western and Buddhist. It is also one of the best *philosophy* books I've ever read—my few (minor) objections notwithstanding. *Engaging Buddhism* is directed primarily at a Western philosophical readership, but is of perhaps equal value to Buddhist philosophers insofar as it articulates many of Buddhism's core philosophical values, to and for Western philosophy, and in a distinctly recognizable Western philosophical voice, but one that does no damage to the often radically different frameworks, methods, and modes of discourse that are distinctively Buddhist, much of which it presents in its own modality.

Garfield argues throughout the text for the main conclusion that Buddhist philosophy is similar enough to Western philosophy to be recognizable as philosophically sophisticated, but different enough to be interesting, challenging, and insightful. Garfield painstakingly illustrates and deftly explains how various schools of thought and dialectical traditions within Buddhism offer radically alternative but equally valid—if not often superior—metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, logical, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and ethical frameworks, methods, and arguments the cogency and overall coherence of which place a rational demand on Western philosophers to seriously reflect on the scope, validity, and objectivity of their

own frameworks, methods, and arguments, and also a demand that Western philosophers engage with Buddhism as a significant philosophical partner in all of the above-mentioned areas of inquiry. In making this argument, Garfield introduces the Western philosophical reader to a comprehensively representative sampling of many of the major Buddhist traditional divisions, schools of thought, inter-school dialectical tensions (as well as those developed in dialectical tension with extra-Buddhist orthodox and unorthodox Indian philosophies), canonical and authoritative texts, key figures and their commentators, concepts, terms, languages, methods, models, arguments, disagreements, concerns, frameworks, and issues within Buddhism, going into great detail when necessary, and glossing over details when details are unnecessary. *Engaging Buddhism* is not meant to be an introduction, but it serves nonetheless as an incredibly rich, informative view of the philosophical depths of Buddhism from and for a Western philosophical perspective, striking an excellent balance between both.

Engaging Buddhism proceeds through this somewhat bi-philosophical hermeneutical project in a mode of philosophical discourse that is deeply informed by and engaged with the latest contemporary Western and Buddhist philosophical analogues, alike or unlike, in all the relevantly related philosophical domains. Garfield's comprehensive conceptual handle on the multiple dimensions, evolving stages, and disciplinary fields within both Western and Buddhist philosophical traditions is not only impressively ency-

clopedic, but sagacious, and transparently grounds the many metaphilosophical insights that weave together the great variety of comparative and contrastive analyses that function as premises in support of his main conclusion.

Although I have disagreed with some of his *specific* claims in the past, and some in this book, I became an immediate convert to the main argument here upon reading the first chapter, and only more convinced by the time I reached the last. I only wish I'd read this text 40 years ago. Garfield has a way with words, to say the least, and with rendering comprehensible the most opaque, otherwise inaccessible ideas, on both sides of the philosophical divide.

For example, take the tetralemma— p , not p ($\sim p$), p and not p ($p \wedge \sim p$), p or not p ($p \vee \sim p$) (alternately, either P is true, false, true and false, or neither true nor false)—used by certain Indian philosophers. Garfield explains that, rather than affirming four truth-values, the tetralemma reflects the same two basic truth-values (T/F) and two concatenation subsets (both T and F, and neither T nor F). I've never wrapped my mind around the first subset—the contradiction: p and $\sim p$ —as my instincts urge upon me the idea that if something is both T and F, it must be that an equivocation permits it. The negative version of the tetralemma is something I also haven't been able to fully affirm, despite my own (seemingly decent) efforts at understanding it and explaining it to my students: the so-called 'four-cornered negation' in which each lemma is negated. The negated tetralemma applies, however, according to Garfield, whenever there is presupposition failure. For example, given Buddhist skepticism about the incoherence of the concept of the (transcendent, immaterial, metaphysically substantive) self, none of these four truth-value possibilities is applicable: that there is a self (p), that there is no self ($\sim p$), that either there is or is not a self ($p \vee \sim p$), that there is neither a self nor no self ($\sim(p \vee \sim p)$). I can't do explanatory justice to it, but, for example, one might imagine that, given Buddhist skepticism about the self, the $\sim p$ option would make sense: it is false that there is a self ($\sim p$). But that would be misleading, on the Buddhist tetralemmic view, somewhat akin to saying that it is false that the present king of France is bald (which cannot be stated non-misleadingly in simple propositional logic, but only in some sort of sub-sentential or predicate logic as a conjunction of the claim that there is a present king of France and the predication that he

is bald, at least one conjunct of which is false). Similar reasoning justifies the other two concatenations that include the $\sim p$ option.

Without the degree of formalism developed in Western logics to deal with such puzzles, Buddhist logicians nonetheless were onto presupposition failure informally, well over a millennium before Western logicians stumbled over it. Perhaps I'm inadvertently admitting my own philosophical limitations here, but my resistance to this can be expressed as follows: if there is no such thing as a self, then the claim that there is no self ($\sim p$) is true. If that is too simplistic because there is some sort of conceptual confusion or category error in the concept of the self (say, as might obtain if someone asserted the existence of nothingness), then it might make sense to deny p , to deny $\sim p$, and to deny $p \wedge \sim p$, but it still seems sensible to assert $\sim(p \vee \sim p)$: there is no truth or falsity to the claim that there is (or isn't) a self. Maybe Wittgensteinian Buddhists can accuse me of being caught in a (bivalent) picture, but this is one of the most puzzling items for me, along with paraconsistent logic.

While I cannot retrace the steps in my transformation, Garfield managed to convince me of the Wittgensteinian point that my confusion about and resistance to the use of the four-cornered negation here may very well be a function of the fact that I'm caught in a picture, in this case not necessarily bivalence per se, but (from the Buddhist perspective) a dualistic mode of conceptual proliferation, which then projects bivalence onto conceptually structured representations conjured to stand in for my experience (truth-functional propositions), which experience might not actually admit of them in the way my consciousness is (habitually, but not necessarily constitutively) structured to conceive it.

The tetralemma is a relatively minor point among dozens of radically different ideas Garfield draws from Buddhism and presents as a challenge to the Western philosophical mind to consider from the point of view of charitable interpretation, which attempt at charity Garfield facilitates by producing Western arguments, ideas, and analogies wherever appropriate (but frequently where ancient Buddhist arguments touch upon the same ideas), such as the Wittgensteinian concept of language games, Sellars' myth of the given, nominalism about universals, the Gricean causal/intentional communicative model of meaning,

Humean sentimentalism and causal regularity, critiques of sense data, qualia, naïve introspectionism, reflexive versus hierarchical theories of consciousness, phenomenological bracketing, and mereological reductionism, to mention but a few among many others. Let me discuss, in some detail, a few other Buddhist ideas Garfield presents, in a sequence that will hopefully lay some foundations for understanding on which to build as I proceed.

In his introductory chapter, Garfield presents the essentially soteriological/transformational orientation of *all* Buddhist philosophy as a function of (and response to) three inter-related core (metaphysical) insights of universal scope in Buddhism: impermanence, interdependence, and absence ('emptiness') of self (of intrinsic, independent, essential, or self-nature—not only in humans or even sentient beings, but in all phenomena). Because all phenomena and events are impermanent or momentary, nothing satisfies diachronic identity conditions, or endures unchanged through the series of changes. Because all phenomena originate interdependently, in complete causal dependence on prior and/or co-present conditions and phenomena, nothing has an essence or self-nature that is metaphysically substantive, independent, autonomous. Because all wholes are conceptual constructs mereologically reducible to their ultimately atomic impartite parts (psychophysical tropes), no composite even satisfies synchronic identity conditions, although in some earlier Buddhist (Abhidharma) schools, the atomistic tropes have intrinsic, substantive nature and identity, albeit momentary.

These three metaphysical insights are common to all schools of Buddhism, though some are understood differently. They shape most if not all other doctrines and practices, including the Four Noble Truths—the Buddha's four major claims, analogous to a medical assessment in offering a *diagnosis* of the human condition (*dukkha*: existential suffering), an *etiology* (erroneous/illusory self-conception), a *prognosis* (*nirvāṇa*, the cure, is possible through reversal/removal of the cause), and a *prescription* (factors to cultivate to enact the cure) in his first public discourse, the fourth of which expresses the Eightfold Path to *nirvāṇa*, enlightenment; the Four Noble Truths are shared by all forms of Buddhism. Those eight elements in the Eightfold Path include 'right' (enlightenment-oriented/soteriologically skillful) views, intentions, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation.

Each such element has an ethical dimension insofar as the reduction of *dukkha* is the primary aim of the enlightenment aspiration—one's own and that of all sentient beings. Garfield explains that from the Buddhist perspective, suffering is taken as obviously bad for all sentient beings, and since there is no real self/other distinction, the reduction of suffering for all sentient beings is equally valuable.

The purpose of the enlightenment aspiration—*bo-dhicitta* (awakening mind)—is to reduce suffering, in oneself and all sentient beings. For an enlightened being will eliminate its own suffering and will be moved naturally to reduce the suffering of all sentient beings with which it comes in contact. That being so, the primary virtue to be cultivated in Buddhism is care, often translated from the Sanskrit and Pāli *karuṇā* as 'compassion,' but Garfield prefers *care* because he sees that as more consonant with the function of the term in Buddhist doxography and practice: care expresses itself in actions and attempts to help beings cared for, and from the enlightened perspective—which lacks any self/other duality—all sentient beings are to be cared for, their suffering being equal.

Because this soteriological orientation colors all of Buddhism, some have objected that Buddhist ethics is not really ethics, but some sort of prudential system; others focus on its emphasis on virtues, such as care, arguing that Buddhism is aretaic; still others argue that its emphasis on reducing suffering entails a negative consequentialism. Garfield rejects these attempts as Procrustean attempts to gloss Buddhist ethics in Western terms, which efforts threaten to distort what is really going on here. Garfield argues that Buddhist ethics has a radically different orientation and framework: Buddhist ethics is a way of life designed to reorient the aspirant cognitively, affectively, motivationally, and phenomenologically toward enlightenment and the reduction of *dukkha* for all sentient beings, by transforming the individual via the elimination of erroneous/illusory self-conception, which thereby generates right view and spontaneous care as a default mode of enactive, embodied engagement with and comportment within the world. As such, it is not properly understood as consequentialist, deontological, or aretaic, though it implicitly endorses a negative consequentialist value, places duties of care (which imply non-harm) on aspirants, and emphasizes the cultivation of care and related virtues. There is no clean or sharp fact-value or prudential-moral gap

in Buddhism, for this sort of *dukkha*-eliminating soteriology determines Buddhism's instrumental ethical orientation, the fact of suffering is taken as a universally valid experientially grounded natural fact, and the universal undesirability of suffering motivates its status as something to be reduced and eliminated for the sake of all sentient beings, oneself included.

Apart from enlightened beings, such as the Buddha (who first figured this all out) and some of his followers, most sentient beings suffer from (a sort of willed) ignorance of the three central, insightful metaphysical facts (impermanence, interdependence, and absence or emptiness of self-nature), what Buddhist philosophers typically call 'ignorance' but Garfield calls 'primal confusion,' ignoring these facts and imagining themselves to be autonomous, independent, metaphysically substantive (soul-like) agent-selves conceived as the diachronically identical unchanged bearers of their ever-changing minds and bodies, and thus principally oriented toward the satisfaction of their mostly ego-based desires, and the elimination of anything that thwarts them, in such excessive degrees as to constitute the "three poisons" of delusion, greed, and hatred. This false ego- or self-based consciousness—primal confusion—is the central cause of existential suffering, *dukkha* (alternately, stress, dis-ease, dis-satisfaction). Buddhism's sole purpose is the elimination of *dukkha* in oneself and all sentient beings. The elimination of the primal confusion, the cause of *dukkha*, is the magnetic north of all Buddhist inquiry, practice, and value. Since delusional primal confusion is what causes ego grasping and its excesses of attraction (to pleasure) and of aversion (to pain), its antidote is right view: soteriologically appropriate understanding of the illusory nature of the sense of self. And since what fuels primal confusion is mindless inattention to—ignoring—the actual phenomenology of experience (which, if attended to carefully would fail to support the false sense of self), its antidote is mindfulness: moment-to-moment attentiveness to and examination of actual experience.

Mindfulness (together with the other seven factors) is the prescription, and the cure is the penetrating insight such attention to experience will eventually yield into the illusory nature of the sense of self, the full fruition of which is *nirvāṇa*, the blowing out of the illusory flame of ego and ego-grasping. The Eightfold Path is the specific prescription of eight components of one's experience that need to be attended to in or-

der to attain *nirvāṇa*. Mindfulness is the key element because mindless inattention is what blurs cognition, yielding false view of self (primal confusion); mindful attention yields clear cognition and thus correct view. False view causes false beliefs about what is worth pursuing; correct view causes true beliefs about what is worth pursuing: the end of suffering for all sentient beings.

Returning to the bigger picture, Garfield lays out the structure of the rich dialectical progression from early Buddhist Abhidharma reductionism, to Yogācāra idealism, which he insists is best understood as a distinct kind of phenomenology, and finally to Madhyamaka anti-realism/constructivism, delineating major theses and objections that led to the subsequent views Garfield explains as hierarchically stacked. The reductionists insisted that all macro-level entities are designated as wholes solely by virtue of pragmatic conventional designations that are conceptually constructed but which designate what are ultimately mere aggregates of micro-phenomenal, highly ephemeral, impartite psychophysical tropes that are neither identical to the whole, nor to their configuration, nor which constitute it. The idealists insist that all we are ever aware of are our own perceptual experiences, these are all projections of our conceptual proliferations, and thus there are no conceptualization-independent entities beyond what we experience. Garfield argues that the phenomenological interpretation of the so-called idealists comports best with charitable interpretation, according to which—and all of this is simplifying greatly—what is bracketed is not the ontological implications of experience in favor of its purely subjective experiential dimensions, but conceptual proliferation altogether. The ground for doing so involves both transcendental arguments about the conditions necessary for the possibility of perceptual experience and about the (Nietzschean) self-refuting character of bracketing ontology, on the one hand, and the authoritative claims of skilled yogic phenomenologists—beginning with the Buddha—who claim that conceptualization-free experience is not only possible, but nondualistic, direct, unmediated, and thus pure, on the other hand. The same arguments that the idealist deploys to call into doubt the external world apply equally to the subjective domain of experience: just as there is a gap between what is experienced and what may be causing it from the putative outside (God, an evil demon, the Matrix, etc.), so too there is a gap between what is experienced in a naïve realist

interpretation of introspection and what may be causing it internally (subpersonal, pre- or sub-conscious processes), in which case the anti-realists insist that whereas the reductionists privilege putatively objective micro-phenomena and the idealists privilege putatively subjective mental phenomena, since the same arguments that undermine the one undermine the other, both are dubious, on the one hand, but metaphysically/epistemically equal, on the other.

Garfield is keen to connect the arguments each such Buddhist school makes with relevant themes in contemporary phenomenology, cognitive science, and philosophy of mind, such as cognitive biases, cognitive and perceptual errors and illusions, debates about whether perceptual consciousness is reflexive or necessarily involves higher-order elements, and so forth, all of which are as rich on either side of the Western/Buddhist fence. My summaries here are terribly inadequate relative to the rich insights and analyses Garfield delivers on the connections between all of these issues, each of which supports his general conclusion. Some objections I have must be prefaced with the disclaimer that they are minor. As they are all minor, I'll just sample two as representatives. First, Garfield is no fan of the Nagelian construal of consciousness or subjectivity enshrined in the phrase 'what it's like' (to experience anything) that has become ubiquitous in Western philosophy of mind and phenomenology, with loud voices like that of David Chalmers insisting we could know nothing else were it not for our subjective consciousness, the explanatory puzzle of identifying how matter can be conscious at all that he identifies as the so-called *hard problem* (other problems, such as specifying the causal/functional neural correlates of various features of mind, such as language processing, visual recognition, or memory, the grey matter correlates of which are being discovered on a regular basis, which he identifies as *easy problems*). But I think Garfield overstates his case against *what it is like* (to not be a philosophical zombie). Let me provide a fairly representative, somewhat lengthy quotation that I hope will illustrate this without much argument on my part:

“It may well be that the phenomenological project as prosecuted by Dignāga and Husserl, and as resurrected by Coseru and Zahavi, may be misguided for a simple reason: There may be nothing that it is like to be me because there is no me; there may be nothing that it is like for me to see

red, because I don't. Instead of a single locus of consciousness contemplating a distinct world of objects—like a Wittgensteinian eye in the visual field or a Kantian transcendental ego—to be a person, from a Buddhist perspective, is to be a continuum of multiple, interacting sensory, motor and cognitive states and processes.” (209)

Granted, a lot of reasonable argument precedes this dramatic set of proclamations, but it seems more reasonable—to me—to deny that *what it is like* has the particular philosophical implications this or that philosopher claims it does than to deny flat out that *there is anything it is like* to be a conscious being experiencing variously unique cognitive episodes, regardless of their ultimately complex, possibly deceptive metaphysical/causal composition. Arguably, even enlightened Buddhists are experiencing something in a way that is *what it is like* to experience the world, themselves included, which counts as the veridical, valid, or enlightened way, which must differ from *what it is like* for the rest of us to experience being caught in the grip of the picture of primal confusion. It must have been by reference to features of *what that was like* for the Buddha before and after his enlightenment that he managed to generate his medical analysis of *what it is like* for the human condition to be caught up in *dukkha*.

Second, Garfield glosses over an issue that is dear to my philosophical heart, that of agency, self-regulation, or, more problematically, autonomy or free will. Elsewhere (Repetti, *infra*) he has written a polemic against the concept, arguing basically that it is a Western apologetic construct invented for Abrahamic theodicy in order to shift the blame to mankind for the Fall in Eden and the ubiquity of evil and suffering in a world believed to be created by an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, omniscient being, a construct that holds no truck with the creatorless, impersonal Buddhist worldview. Here, however, he makes a number of claims that arguably contradict that stance. For example, he argues that mindfulness, attention to volition and experience, enables us to self-regulate, to transform habitual conditioning, to rewrite our own narratives, and so forth (288, 293, 306), but these abilities arguably constitute some form of compatibilist or semi-compatibilist features of free will. But Garfield doesn't really discuss free will here, except perhaps to intimate its irrelevance. My objection may be stated as a complaint that he missed an important opportuni-

ty to at least spell out how various Buddhists do and might take different positions on a subject that has great traction among Western philosophers and even recently among Buddhists (see R. Repetti, *Buddhist Perspectives on Free Will: Agentless Agency* (Routledge, 2016)).

Again, before closing, I must reiterate that these sorts of disagreement are relatively minor, insofar as they constitute standard sorts of philosophical reactions to be expected, particularly in the face of very bold challenges to things typically taken to be extremely evident—in the case of *what it is like* to experience anything, as evident as anything else. Though they are my own, and I have a handful more of them, I would count them as less meaningful than a few dogs barking at a passing caravan (from the perspective of the caravan).

In sum, Garfield has not only offered a blueprint for many major points where both Western and Buddhist philosophical traditions may fruitfully engage

with each other, but he has in many cases actually demonstrated how, making many points of dialectical exchange for both sides, in the course of constructing his overall argument. *Engaging Buddhism* is one of the most significant contributions to the Western reception of and engagement with Buddhist philosophy. This book is a must read for Western philosophers, but also for Buddhist philosophers who attempt to engage Western philosophy, as this blueprint is bi-directional.

Engaging Buddhism begins with a preface that situates the text, followed by an introductory chapter introducing Buddhist philosophy (basic Buddhist concepts, orientation, terms, history, etc.), followed by two chapters that explore metaphysics, a chapter on each of the self, consciousness, phenomenology, epistemology, logic and philosophy of language, and ethics, and a concluding methodological post-script on how to interpret and evaluate the project, followed by references and an index.