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Is *Moonshadows* Lunacy? The Cowherds Respond

The Cowherds

We thank Amy Donahue for her attention to our work, and we thank the editors of *Philosophy East and West* for an opportunity to reply. We confess that we were not sure whether to reply. On the one hand we believe that her critique is so misguided that it needs no reply; on the other hand, we were worried that others might take our silence as conceding her point. On reflection, we decided that the larger issue she raises is important enough to restate our position on it: cross-cultural philosophy demands respect for our interlocutors; respect demands serious philosophical engagement, not reflexive deference.

We agree with Donahue that those who are trained in the current techniques of their discipline but use those techniques to study elements of a culture that is far from them in space or time must be careful not to objectify illegitimately the subject of their investigations. Donahue, however, appears not to have grasped the extent to which the Cowherds' enterprise is precisely the way to avoid doing this. We engage philologically and philosophically with the Madhyamaka tradition not as curators or as acolytes but as interlocutors. That is how to respect, and not to objectify, one's

conversational partner. The most egregious Orientalism is that which regards those who pursue philosophy in different garb and in different idioms as so different from us that we have no right to take their views seriously or to engage in critical dialogue. We fear that that is what is represented in Donahue's critique. We begin by discussing some specific charges Donahue levels against us. We then turn to the larger irony: she is riding the horse she charges us with having stolen.

1. On Grasping the Snake

It is far from clear precisely what Donahue would have us do differently. One way in which projects of this sort sometimes go astray is by anachronistically imposing a problematic taken from the current philosophical conversation onto another context where it has no place. Hegel and Schopenhauer can be accused of doing this in their treatments of the Indian tradition, but not the Cowherds. Indeed our project runs in quite the opposite direction, taking its guidance from debates among actual Mādhyamikas.

Mādhyamikas, like other Buddhists, distinguish between what they call *conventional truth* and what they call *ultimate truth*. By *conventional truth* most (though perhaps not all) mean roughly what philosophers nowadays call *common sense* or the folk theory of the world. And by *ultimate truth* they mean what is left standing (if anything) after conventional truth has been subjected to rigorous philosophical analysis. Madhyamaka is distinctive in its (at least apparent) contention that *nothing* can stand up to rigorous philosophical analysis, so that no statements are ultimately true, that nothing exists ultimately.

In *Moonshadows*, we took this commitment to emptiness, and to a distinction that appears both to disparage conventional truth and to take it as the only truth there is, as a philosophical starting point. We explored some of the important canonical sources for these views, and investigated their consequences. The most obvious apparent consequence is that the only truths there can be are conventional truths, the commonsense beliefs that are largely taken for granted by most people most of the time. Donahue contends that some Cowherds exhibit neo-imperialist bias by presupposing a monolithic common sense, presumably that of some oppressor class to which we either belong or owe ideological allegiance—more on this below. But this is simply wrong: we made no assumptions whatsoever as to what constitutes common sense. For all we say it may be universal across times, cultures, and classes, or it may vary widely over all these indices and others as well. There are of course famous instances of variability, like “The earth is flat,” that may have been accepted by most people at one time but are widely rejected today. Indeed, in some of our chapters, we specifically wonder about what its domain ought to be, given Madhyamaka commitments, and we consider the consequences of various views. This criticism simply reflects her misreading of our text, and of its purpose—a snake incorrectly grasped.

We also ask whether analysis can play any role in determining what we should believe. What counsel does Madhyamaka offer when analysis shows that some widely held belief that is for the most part unreflectively accepted cannot be true? Should one lapse into silence—be it of the skeptical, the quietist, or the mystical

variety—or should one instead try to rectify the situation? And if the latter, is the upshot to be blanket rejection of the folk belief in question, or should some effort be made to show how the conflicting beliefs can be reconciled? The second question is one that Mādhyamikas debated vociferously. Our engagement with this question does not objectify or condescend to that debate; it *continues* that debate. If analysis shows that the chariot and its parts cannot be equally real, then one might simply say that the widespread view that they are is false, or one might instead try to show how the view that both are real might prove useful under ordinary circumstances and so be reconcilable with a deeper truth that is revealed by analysis.

Mādhyamikas like Bhāviveka, Candrakīrti, Śāntaraksita, and Kamalaśīla took divergent positions regarding how to understand the senses in which ordinary views (however widespread or refined) might be true and false, and we worked to understand and to advance those debates. Bhāviveka’s position, for instance, was of course not held out of reverence for the reductive methodologies of the modern sciences, and we never suggest as much. He was convinced instead that reductive analysis is an essential tool in the core Buddhist project of overcoming the ‘I’ sense. When, for instance, Siderits argues that the ability to explain the efficacy of scientific medicine is a reason to think Bhāviveka was right, he is not attributing to Bhāviveka any views about modern science; nor is he asserting that the standpoint of modern science is somehow an epistemically privileged position; instead, he is offering an additional reason a modern Buddhist might have for taking Bhāviveka’s position seriously. (Most people today do, after all, believe that children should be vaccinated against polio, and it might be nice to be able to account for this.) This is what it is to *engage with*, rather than to *curate*, classical debates, whether they be Greek, Chinese, or Indian.

When Tillemans and other Cowherds worry, on one plausible interpretation of his views, that Candrakīrti might lead us into a “dismal slough” of relativism, they are working with Kamalaśīla to find the best way to understand what has become known as the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika debate (a debate, we might add, thematized not by Indians but by Tibetans—were they Orientalist imperialists when they addressed this material?). When Dreyfus and Garfield explain Prāsaṅgika and certain Tibetan interpreters of that Indian view by bringing in Sextus Empiricus, they are using an example that will be familiar to many readers in order to illustrate the view of Patsab; this is a hermeneutic trope common to the Indian *śāstra* literature.

Donahue claims that all of this amounts to a valorization of current Western views over the Buddhist. This charge is not only undefended, it is false. In each of these cases the issues being addressed derive directly from Madhyamaka literature. The language and some of the analytical tools are modern and Western, but there is nothing wrong with that. We are contemporary philosophers who read the Indian and Tibetan texts with care. We believe that Donahue has not read our own text with the same care.

Donahue discusses at some length Finnigan and Tanaka’s example of the adventures of Alice, Bill, and Charlie on the bodhisattva path. She asks whether their illustrative suggestion that Alice’s response to the child beggar—working with a social service organization striving to eliminate the child begging industry—exhibits more of the bodhisattva’s virtues than Bill’s and Charlie’s responses. Donahue

characterizes the example of Alice as engaging in “middle class charitable activities” and “positioned in ways that ‘ordinary workers’ are imagined in the global North.” She then accuses Finnigan and Tanaka of aligning with “the sovereign subject of global capital” and claims that, through this example, “concrete experiences and norms particular to global capitalism’s sovereign subject are again made to appear naturally and timelessly authoritative.”

Donahue’s discussion of this example, however, misses the point of its role in the Cowherds’ enterprise. This example is offered to illustrate a schematic point: that a change in phenomenology might be a way to conceive of ethical development *if*, for reasons offered in the first half of the chapter, one grants the values articulated by such Madhyamaka thinkers as Śāntideva and eschews the project of providing justification. As Finnigan and Tanaka explicitly state, “variety in situations will often call for variety of response; placing bread in a child’s hand may be appropriate in some circumstances but not others” (p. 230). To ignore this acknowledgment of the complexities involved in specific situations, and to assume uncharitably that Alice will unwittingly impose the values of global capital is simply to beg the question.

II. What Horse Are You Riding?

Donahue’s critique is not only deeply misguided in its reading of *Moonshadows*, it is terribly ironic. The Cowherds’ project is motivated by great respect for the Madhyamaka tradition. It seems to us that one good way to show respect is by taking Madhyamaka seriously as philosophy. And what would be a better way of doing this than that of continuing the philosophical dialogue? Donahue seems especially put out when Cowherds argue against positions held by Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa. Has she somehow discerned that Bhāviveka and Śāntarakṣita are not Mādhyamikas? And is the only way for scholars to show respect for the Madhyamaka tradition to circumambulate the museum display containing their relics? That is not how Indian or Tibetan philosophers showed respect for one another. They commented upon and argued with one another.

The irony is only compounded when she avers that the norms guiding the Cowherds derive from a “racially demarcated ‘West’.” This is somewhat insulting to certain Cowherds. One is Tibetan, and another Japanese. Donahue seems to adopt an Archimedean ethnic/cultural fulcrum from which she ascribes a “racially demarcated Western” point of view to all of us. We doubt that there can be such a fulcrum. We also note that the postcolonial critical framework she adopts, not to mention her own professional position, is a product of this same apparently problematic Western discourse. She is not criticizing us from medieval Nālandā but from twenty-first-century Georgia.

One can argue endlessly about who is an “authentic” Mādhyamika, about who gets to read, to represent, or to engage with Indian and Tibetan texts. That question not only does not get one very far, but reinscribes precisely the Orientalist boundaries we seek to erase, but which Donahue takes for granted, even while accusing us of adopting that objectionable standpoint. We are well aware that the

answers we propose or the analyses we suggest in *Moonshadows* may be wrong, and we welcome critiques of our project, be they philosophical or philological. But the use of facile rhetorical analysis and willful misreading to charge us with an imperialist political agenda does not strike us as criticism worth taking seriously.

Reply to the Cowherds: Serious Philosophical Engagement with and for Whom?



Amy Donahue

In ordinary philosophical contexts, it is customary to abide by due processes. For example, we engage the particularities of arguments rather than contenting ourselves with cursory approximations of claims and positions. We reject conclusions by demonstrating that specific premises are suspect or that these premises do not offer valid support. We do not dismiss arguments against us on the basis of sentiment or through *tu quoque* arguments and fallacies of diversion.

In practice, however, these due processes do not extend equally to all in our community. My point is not that we occasionally fall short of our ideals and norms, which is to be expected. Rather, I mean that explicitly denying these due processes to certain theories and theorists, and doing so in ways that reinforce our field's narrow theoretical and demographic contours, is acceptable practice in much of our discipline (e.g., during peer review processes, on tenure-and-promotion and hiring committees, etc.). Swaths of philosophical scholarship are treated as marginal, and when obliged to engage arguments and persons situated in these *marginal* philosophical positions, it is permissible and even customary to refuse them due processes that prevail in *ordinary* philosophical contexts. When addressing them, we can make rough generalizations about their theses without engaging the particularities of their claims. We can reject their scholarship out of hand as "facile" or not worth "serious" consideration. We suffer no censure if we refuse to examine the premises or validity of their arguments. We can openly employ fallacious *tu quoque* arguments against them while still appearing to ourselves and others as models of *ordinary* philosophical seriousness and rigor! A *de facto* asymmetry exists between *ordinary* and *marginal* philosophical contexts, between contexts in which due processes apply and contexts in which due processes are denied, and it is partially through this asymmetry or "division of labor" that our field reinforces and preserves the privilege of a narrow subset of persons and philosophical possibilities.

The Cowherds speak of my "point" and "the larger issue" I raise. But they do not engage the arguments of Spivak, Quijano, or Lugones that serve as the basis of my