

Engaging Engagements with Engaging Buddhism

First, let me thank all three of my critics for their thoughtful and generous engagement with *Engaging Buddhism*, and Christian for organizing this session. I have learned a lot from these critical essays, and they raise more important questions and issues than I have time to address here. Rather than address each critic in turn, I would like to address the issues they raise collectively, speaking to each critic in the context of a more general philosophical conversation. I will first address a set of methodological problems they raise, then turn to a broad set of issues surrounding how we think about experience and what we might learn from the Buddhist tradition about how to interrogate it. I will then respond to some problems about the self before returning to some specific questions about method.

1. Methodology

Anita Avramides reflects helpfully on the preconditions of the kind of conversation I am trying to move along. She points out correctly that productive conversation has preconditions, and that includes grand conversations between traditions. And she worries that those preconditions may not be satisfied in the case of the interaction between the Buddhist and Western traditions. I agree with her that these are the kinds of preliminary questions to address. First, Anita points out that more conversation is needed within the Western tradition itself--that many of our colleagues still haven't got past the putative continental-analytic divide, for instance. I agree, but I don't see that as an obstacle. There are similar gulfs within Indian traditions, and even within the Buddhist tradition. Those need to be bridged as well. But our own houses need to be in order before we can go visiting. Sometimes it is useful to visit somebody else's wreckage to get a perspective on one's own.

Anita's worry about the obstacle that might be posed by Buddhism's soteriological project is perhaps more serious. Contemporary Western philosophers, as she points out, often take themselves to address problems that are "just there." Most Buddhist philosophers, on the other hand, take themselves to be engaged in the project of liberation or attaining awakening. So, she suggests, we may not even have enough shared *mission* to have much to talk about; or, to the extent that we do, the constraints on what counts as a reasonable

position or argument might be so different that productive interchange might be impossible. These are serious reasons for hermeneutical pessimism.

I have two remarks in defense of my own optimism. First, even the Western philosophical tradition is not bereft of soteriological intent. That is obvious if we attend to the classical and medieval periods—whose texts and concerns we still take seriously professionally today—but it is true of contemporary philosophy as well. Many—though not all—of our colleagues write books and articles, give talks and teach in the hope that their ideas will lead to better lives for those who pay attention. Second, even when an argument or a philosophical position arises in the context of an explicitly soteriological project, it would be a serious genetic fallacy to refuse to credit it if it is cogent on its own terms. We do not reject the arguments or positions of Aquinas or Scotus simply because they arose in a theological context we now reject. We can extend to same respect to Buddhist analyses of perception or the self.

Moreover, the claim that the problems we find to be “just there” are really independent of the Abrahamic religious traditions may simply reflect too little hermeneutic distance. Consider, for example, the perennial problem of the “freedom of the will.” This problem is often taken to be “just there,” but in fact it owes its entire structure, including the invention of the will as a faculty, to Augustine’s meditations on the theodicy problem generated by the fall from Eden. One of the benefits of the kind of dialogue I want to encourage is the achievement of the kind of hermeneutic distance that lets us see problems we thought to be “just there” as religious artifacts. That might change our attitude towards certain corners of our own traditions.

Third, Anita worries that the official conservatism of the Buddhist tradition and its reference point in the words of the historical Buddha pose a serious obstacle to dialogue with an officially progressive western tradition. I honestly think that this is a non-issue. There is a fight to be had within and between each tradition about our respective degree of progressivity. Is all Western philosophy really a series of footnotes to Plato? Is the Mahāyāna a revolutionary advance over earlier Buddhist traditions? These are the kinds of

metaphilosophical questions dialogue can stimulate. Stimulating those dialogues can benefit each side, but the fact that the dialogues need to be stimulated is no block to interchange. And to turn to the last issue of this kind that Anita raises—that of whether the relation of Western philosophy to science is so different from that of Buddhism to science that dialogue would be difficult—the contemporary Buddhist philosophical community is already very much in dialogue with science, led by the present Dalai Lama's commitment to this modernization of the tradition and his collaboration with Western scientists through such fora as the Mind and Life Institute, in which a number of prominent Western philosophers have participated. Indeed, Evan's ongoing dialogue with Buddhism is mediated through just such an interaction.

Evan's critique raises a different set of methodological questions. He points out that my own reference points in the Western tradition include a Sellarsian orientation towards the philosophy of mind and epistemology, an orientation that he takes to distort not only my *own* thought about the mind, but also the Buddhist tradition. That is a serious charge in this context, because the tendency to distort a tradition with which one engages by refracting it through the wrong lens—confusing a kaleidoscope with a telescope—is one of the greatest dangers in cross-cultural philosophy. On the other hand, as we learn from Gadamer, we always come to the act of interpretation and to conversation with our own background of prejudices. So, the simple fact that we bring our philosophical perspectives to our practice is not itself a criticism, as Evan would agree. His worry is more precise: that my prejudices are both wrong and alien to the tradition I am reading. How can one respond? Well, only by doing philosophy and letting the pudding stand as the proof. Now, given different tastes in pudding, there is no end to this process (and for a Sellarsian, this lack of a foundation is something to celebrate, not to lament). But for a start, I will settle for defending my position and for arguing that the analytic perspective I bring to the task does in fact allow us to talk productively.

Evan's other significant methodological critique is more implicit, and is bound up with some further substantive issues I will address in the next two sections. Though he does not put it this way, I want to crystallize it as the charge that I misappropriate terms from the

Western philosophical lexicon (such as "phenomenology") and reframe techniques (such as bracketing) in a way that so distorts them that one party to the dialogue is simply not present, but is represented by a caricature. This demands a bit of defense before I go any further.

I am trying in *Engaging Buddhism* to demonstrate how attention to the Buddhist philosophical tradition can help us to extend the Western philosophical imaginary. That involves, *inter alia*, developing different approaches to phenomenology, not just pursuing European phenomenology with a bit of Sanskrit terminology. So, when I talk about *shallow* and *deep phenomenology*, or ask us to think differently about what bracketing involves in phenomenological reflection, I have chosen to use familiar terms to indicate different species of the same genus. I think that that is an appropriate way to engage in conversation. Here is an analogy: in the Abrahamic religions, the term *theology* denotes the theory of the deity. In inter-religious dialogue literature, however, it is common to talk about "Buddhist theology" with reference to Buddhist doctrine, despite the fact that Buddhism has no *theos*, no deity. When we use the term this way, we are not mis-using it; we are extending its range, learning that religious doctrine can exceed the theory of a god. So, while I acknowledge using some terms from the European tradition in unfamiliar ways, I do not see this as a methodological error, but as a broadening of the senses of these terms in a way that is both natural and necessary.

2. Thinking through experience

Eric and Evan are phenomenal realists; I am not. I should also say that within the Buddhist tradition there are those who agree with Eric and Evan and those who agree with me. My purpose in using Buddhist arguments to defend a non-phenomenalist account of experience is therefore not to urge that Buddhism, per se, is opposed to the reality of qualia, qualitative properties and the rest, but to show how engaging with some Buddhist arguments can take us in that direction, particularly given the popular tendency to associate Buddhism with a commitment to a doctrine of experiential immediacy. But of course I do defend that position; I don't just offer it for the reader's delectation, and I do

suggest that the most compelling strain of Buddhist thought about the mind—the Madhyamaka tradition—leads us in that direction. So, to go after me on this is fair game.

Eric suggests that I am committed to a false dilemma: that we are either infallible regarding our inner lives or that we have no inner lives, and then concluding from the fact of fallibility that we have no inner lives. I resist that reading of my argument. Instead, I argue that if by qualitative states we mean states that are the objects of immediate awareness, the foundation of our empirical knowledge, inner states that we introspect, with qualitative properties that are properties of those states and not of the objects we perceive, there are no such states. That is a very different argument—one that Evan, who also resists it, sees as Sellarsian, not Dennettian. To reject those these states (and that, Evan, is to reject the Myth of the Given) is to follow Candrakīrti in rejecting the states taken as foundational by such figures as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. To pair the blueness of the sky with a second property—the qualitative blueness of my inner state when I see the sky—not only multiplies instances of blue, but misses the very logic of sensations, which are called blue because they are the states that causally mediate our experience of blue, not because they are blue. So, when Eric argues that there must be some fact of the matter about my stream of audience experience when the bell was chiming, I resist. Talking about my stream of experience is a hermeneutic, not a causal enterprise. That there were neuropsychological processes causally relevant to my present thought that the bell had been ringing before I noticed it is obvious; that there was a *stream of experience* is a superimposition that may simply be gratuitous, just as to urge that I see a green leaf by first apprehending green qualia is to multiply greens, and solves no problem, as we then have to explain how it is that the apprehension of green qualia gives us any knowledge of green leaves.

Eric concedes the danger of idealism here. He should; Buddhist phenomenologists like Dignāga correctly took it to entail idealism. For it is a short step from arguing that the qualities of the tulip are in my mind to an argument that the only tulips I have ever seen are in my mind. Now, if one is willing to swallow the truth of idealism as the consequence of one's epistemology, that is fine. For such a person, I am not an external object in any case, and what I think should hardly matter. But for those of us who take the reality of the

external world, and the reality of those who join with us to constitute meaning for granted, and who see intentionality as constituted in that shared arena, absolute subjective idealism is a *reductio*.

And this does have implications for the problematic and widely used philosophical phrase "what it is like." It participates in the same multiplication of entities, and the same sealing off of the inner from the outer. It is one thing to ask what the sky is like. We can answer that. But to add to the sky an experience of the sky and to ask what *that* is like is to multiply objects of experience in exactly the same way. When we ask what something is like, whether we take that thing to be inside or outside of our body, we are asking--if we are being cogent—a question about the *object* of our experience, not about our subjectivity. Eric and Evan insist on an account of *phenomenality*, or *consciousness*. I resist the nominalization, if it is meant more than grammatically. I doubt that there is any single property corresponding to either, and so the idea that there is anything that either is like. They are, I suspect, empty signifiers.

This brings me back to something that I think we can learn from the Madhamaka tradition, and here is where Evan and I are principally at odds. (And I suspect that Eric is somewhere in between.) We often begin phenomenological reflection, or reflection on the nature of our experience, by assuming that the experience itself is given to us, that there is some immediate component to our inner lives. We also tend to take for granted that our experience is structured by subject-object duality, because that is how we take what we think is given. To take both the immediacy of experience and the veridicality of its apparent structure as the starting point for analysis, and to ask what must be the case in order for us to have this immediate experience, and to be subjects of objects seems obviously correct from a naive perspective.

That is the attitude that requires bracketing, which amounts to a bracketing both of our commitment to the external world and to an internal world. But the thrust of so much Buddhist philosophical reflection—both on the Madhyamaka and in the Yogācāra traditions—is that that is all illusory. To take it for granted and to try to explain it is like

trying to explain how the water got into the mirage. This is hard to wrap one's head around. One of the values of engaging Buddhism—not the book, the activity—is that it helps us to do so.

This point is also connected to Evan's and my deep disagreement regarding introspection. Evan, in the passage I quote, argues that introspection can be trained to be more *accurate*, thus taking it as an epistemic activity in which a subject is related more or less successfully to an inner object. That is the claim with which I take issue— and so I also take issue with the claim that there is a standard of accuracy in introspection. For that suggests that the objects of introspection are independent of the act of introspection, and that the reports we offer in introspection are empirical surveys of an inner life, as opposed to interpretations of ourselves and constructions of the illusion of an inner domain. Accuracy, in my view, is simply the wrong way to think about introspective activity.

3. The Self

I now turn from phenomenology to metaphysics, and the consideration of the self. Anita, following my colleague Amber Carpenter (and her truly excellent *History of Indian Buddhist Philosophy*) defends the Pudgalavādin or personalist tradition in arguing that over and above the fundamental sub-personal constituents that constitute the conventional person, there is a distinct entity supervening on them in which the person truly consists. Anita and Amber Carpenter defend the Pudgalavādin view that such a self is necessary in order to account for subjectivity, agency and the unity of consciousness. Now anyone from the European tradition sees immediately the attractiveness of Pudgalavāda. This Nyāya-inspired argument is a critique of purely causal accounts of cognitive activity and of the claim that the person is simply the causal continuum on the basis of which other Buddhists say it is imputed. This is anticipatory of Kant's argument for the transcendental unity of apperception and his argument that the continuity of a transcendental ego is a condition of genuine subjectivity, agency and the unity of consciousness at a time and over time. And this argument, like that of the Pudgalavādins, was mobilized against purely causal and imputational accounts such as Hume's.

I agree that this position has a great deal of plausibility to it. So did Candrakīrti, who treats it as the most sophisticated error one can commit en route to understanding selflessness. That is one of the reasons I spend time articulating this position in *Engaging Buddhism*. But from a Madhyamaka perspective, we can also see the difficulties. (And part of what I am trying to do in the book is to show the range of positions available in the Buddhist tradition and the range of arguments deployed within the tradition in internecine polemics; the fact that I defend some positions and reject others is secondary to my purpose. This also why I am uncomfortable with the language of “Buddhist orthodoxy.” I don’t think there is any such thing. While I defend a Madhyamaka view, many Buddhists would disagree with this. I am more interested in the variety and the arguments than a particular view.)

The problem is that in trying to have the cake of a real self and to eat it through making it an indescribable supervenient entity, the Pudgalavādins fail to accomplish their own goals. One difficulty is that, as Candrakīrti points out, the work of unification that the self is meant to do is insufficient to that task. That work is real psychological, causal work, not mere conceptual posit. The processes responsible for any such unity of subjectivity or agency would have to be genuine ground-level psychological processes, just what a supervenient Pudgala can't do. A second problem, as Candrakīrti also points out, is that the unity that this posit is meant to explain is itself fictitious. While at any moment we have the illusion that we are unified subjects of experience or agency, he argues, what needs explanation is not that unity, but the illusion, not the water in a, but the mistaken perception. And the illusion does not require anything as rich as the Pudgala.

This is why Candarakīrti, as Locke was to do a millenium later, regarded personhood as more a forensic than a metaphysical notion, seeing the person as broadly supervenient, not narrowly supervenient. And Candrakīrti argues—this time anticipating Hume, and persuasively, I think—that this sense of personal identity does a better job of explaining the object of self-grasping. While to be sure, it has biological and psychological bases, the person we are is also a function of social and ecological processes. I like that approach, as it seems to be both metaphysically and naturalistically sound. But once again, the purpose of the book is to enrich the dialogue about personal identity by introducing these voices, and I

am happy to have done that, even if I have not convinced everyone of the correctness of the positions I defend.

Evan's tastes in this regard lie on the other side of the spectrum, with the Yogācāra school and its more transcendental notion of subjectivity. Once again, I fear that in arguing that we are in fact constituted by a transcendental apperception or a pure subject position, he is explaining the water, not the mirage. And in fact, as I show in the book in my discussion of *The Treatise of the Three Natures*, even Vasubandhu, one of the important progenitors of that tradition, argues that subjectivity itself is an illusion, coordinated as it must be with objectivity. If we think that the poles of subject and object in experience are themselves constructed, then an analysis that takes them as given—whether empirically or transcendently—is the wrong way to go; instead we require an analysis of the origin of the illusion, not of its content.

Evan goes with the later Yogācāra tradition that introduces reflexive awareness and some version of apperception into the very notion of consciousness. While that might appear to be promising, as it replaces a model of an inner subject and an outer object with one in terms of a subject apprehending itself, beyond the obvious problem of idealism, it retains the idea of primitive subjectivity, which cannot easily be understood in the absence of an object. I also point out that there is not one view, but a range of views regarding reflexive awareness even among its proponents in the Buddhist tradition. Evan disagrees with my reading of Dignāga. Were there time, I would defend it. But Dignāga does clearly state that the content of every awareness includes the subject as well as the object. I criticize that view. It is some of Dharmakīrti's commentators who argue that reflexivity is, as Evan puts it, the nonconceptual feeling of being aware. I criticize the view that every conscious state must be reflexive in that sense as well. Once again, though, I do not think that we can settle these grand issues in phenomenology here; I do think, however, that introducing these multiple Buddhist voices into the debate gives them added texture, and that, even if I am a Sellarsian heretic, showing how Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa thought their way into that perspective gives added texture to the heresy.

Now, Evan charges me with a long list of misreadings and misrepresentations. Evan and I disagree deeply about the relevant matters in the philosophy of mind and phenomenology; we also disagree about how to interpret Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (and regarding whether to endorse their views on many particulars). I will, however, confine myself to discussing our disagreements on substance. It would take more time than we have here to respond to each one of those. That is not to say that I concede those points; it is just that to spend the present time on the hermeneutical issues Evan raises would distract from what I think is important about the book. I also fear that to do so might end up descending into a replay of the Republican presidential debates.

When I describe Evan and Dan Zahavi as minimalists, that is—by contrast with others in the neighborhood—a term of approbation, not a disparagement. Evan’s protestation that they take the self to be even more than minimal would expose the view to even harsher critique, but it is far from necessary. To be sure, both he and Zahavi argue that that narration, embodiment, etc are relevant to the construction of the sense of self, and I agree. But, as Evan himself notes in his remarks, that minimal self is taken to be necessary by both of them. My critique is of that notion of a minimal self. I would love to turn to the memory argument, where I think that Evan simply misses the structure, but I have written extensively about that argument elsewhere, and so I will forego a response here.

4. Back to Method

Let me now return to some methodological issues raised by this set of probing critiques. As I noted above, Evan and Anita each take me to task—albeit in different registers—for importing Western philosophers and Western philosophical terminology in order to understand Buddhist philosophy. The appropriateness of these appropriations is a vexed matter, and I do not pretend to have found the perfect balance. But I do think that I am close. Here is what I am trying to do in *Engaging Buddhism*: First, I am trying to argue to philosophers whose entire intellectual horizon is European that they have something to learn from the Buddhist tradition and that they can engage with it. Second, I am trying to show my colleagues in Buddhist Studies how to learn from the Western tradition and how to talk to their Eurocentric philosopher colleagues. In each case, I think, it makes sense to

bring Western voices in, to explain what might at first seem puzzling Buddhist ideas in more familiar terms, to contrast Buddhist ideas with those with which they might be easily confused, and to show how Buddhist ideas can be fruitful in dialogue with Western ideas. The danger of distortion or decontextualization is always present, but I don't think that the danger counts against the method, only in favor of handling it with care. I hope that I have done so most of the time.

I am *not* engaging, as Evan suggests that I am, in Buddhist apologetics. Nowhere do I argue from scriptural authority; nowhere do I privilege any Buddhist position—even those I defend—as correct *because they are Buddhist*. Nor do I argue that the Buddhist tradition has some unique purchase on philosophical truth or depth. Instead, I am trying to show that a variety of Buddhist positions can contribute to global philosophical debates, and that many are worthy of attention in contemporary debates. I do that sometimes by articulating positions and defending their plausibility, and sometimes by mobilizing them as conversation partners. But to read this as apologetic is to distort both my aim and my method.

I have also extended certain Western ideas or techniques in the service of dialogue, and here is where Evan, in particular takes me to task. I insist, though, that to open a possibility dialogue with Buddhist tradition we can not take European phenomenology as normative, as setting the agenda, as a lens through which all phenomenological reflection must be refracted. I take it that we need to countenance the fact that the phenomenological project can be pursued through other means, and that we can learn more about our own pursuit of that project by considering how it is prosecuted in a different voice, and how that investigation can interact with that initiated in Europe in the early part of the last century.

Evan also chides me for being too Sellarsian. Well, I am pretty Sellarsian. But I don't apologize for that. Many others, including Dan Arnold, Georges Dreyfus and Tom Tillemans have noted the important resonances between Sellars' philosophical approach and that of Tibetan Prasaṅgika Mādhamikas. I think that those resonances are important, and given the resurgence of interest in Sellars' philosophy these days, one way to demonstrate the

relevance of the Buddhist tradition to contemporary debates is to make those resonances salient.

Eric makes a very good methodological point at the close of his remarks. He points out that a cross-cultural engagement should open, rather than close off, philosophical options, I could not agree more heartily, and to the extent that my own polemic has suggested a closing off of options, that is a failing in the book. That was certainly not my intention. My intention in not only developing exegesis of Buddhist ideas, but using the polemically in the context of Western debates was rather to argue by demonstration, by example. That is, I wanted to show how to engage by engaging. Now in doing so, I inevitably prosecute my own philosophical agenda. But my hope was to draw attention to a sufficient range of positions and arguments within the vast Buddhist tradition that my interlocutors in these debates could also find rich Buddhist resources to buttress their own views, as indeed Evan and Christian, among others, have done. So yes, let hundreds of hybrid flowers bloom, and may their hybridity grant them vigor!

5. Celebrating Engagement

I want to close by celebrating the actual engagement with Buddhism evident in this set of replies. Evan reads and takes seriously both Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, and indeed non-Buddhist Indian traditions, and does so in dialogue with phenomenology and cognitive science. Anita read Pudgalavādin literature and mobilized a good Buddhist argument against me, in exactly the manner to which I just adverted. Her engagement with Buddhism demonstrated how to bring the work of Peter Strawson and that of the classical Buddhist tradition into productive conversation. The fact that we disagree about certain conclusions, or even in philosophical orientation, is immaterial; the fact that we can have a conversation in which voices from both traditions are prominent is simply wonderful. And as Anita points out—in fact in this 25th anniversary year of his untimely passing—we are preceded in this process of engagement by Bimal Matilal and his interlocutors. We could mention others as well, past and present. I would never pretend to be the first to engage in this enterprise, but I would love to be the last to have to encourage it.