

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized.* BY OWEN FLANAGAN. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011. Pp. xvi + 264, £19.95.)

The book is about what Flanagan calls 'Buddhism Naturalized'. He explains (p. 3):

Imagine Buddhism without a karmic system that guarantees justice ultimately will be served, without nirvana, without bodhisattvas flying on lotus leaves, without Buddha worlds, without non-physical states of mind, without deities, without heaven and hell realms, without oracles, without lamas who are reincarnated lamas. What would be left? My answer is that what would remain would be an interesting and defensible philosophical theory with a metaphysics, ... epistemology, and ethics. This theory is worthy of attention by analytic philosophers and scientific naturalists because it is deep.

Flanagan takes his brief to be to explain this woo-free version of Buddhism and partially defend it. (And I should say straight away that I am much in sympathy with this general project.)

This is a work of serious analytic philosophy, but it is not a book of scholarship. Diacriticals are dispensed with. References are rarely given to classical Buddhist texts; even the frequent references to Western philosophers are made somewhat casually. And the exposition of Buddhism tends to gloss over the niceties of the differences between various Indo-Tibetan schools of Buddhism. (Sino-Japanese Buddhism seems hardly to be on the agenda – which is slightly odd, given that, generally speaking, Chinese philosophy is much more naturalistic than Indian philosophy.) But what it lacks in scholarship, the book makes up for with its clarity and its lively, non-nonsense style. Owen's aim, I think, is, at least in part, to provoke. In this, the book succeeds admirably. (One aspect of scholarship that is not dispensed with is the footnote. There are some 30 pages of often long and reasonably important endnotes, which for me, at least, made the book harder to read.)

The book is divided into eight chapters and two parts, entitled 'An Essay in Comparative Neurophilosophy' and 'Buddhism as Natural Philosophy'; but the divisions are somewhat arbitrary. Most of the neurophilosophy (where Flanagan is at his strongest) occurs in the first part of the book, but the topics in Buddhist philosophy, such as the self, the nature and aim of a Buddhist life, and the Buddhist virtues, are revisited a number of times in the book, sometimes with a certain amount of repetition.

So much for form. Now for content. Flanagan well explains the Buddhist view of no-self: people have no constant and identity-defining component. They

are simply a complex of interacting and changing parts. As he emphasises, this fits in well with the contemporary scientific view of what a person is. What, then, is the criterion of the identity of a person over time? According to Flanagan, the Buddhist endorses essentially a Lockean criterion of identity (e.g., pp. 96–7, 160): mental continuity. But the matter is rarely spelled out in this way in canonical texts. They are clear that it is *some* kind of causal continuity which accounts for (conventional) diachronic identity, but in the most fully worked-out account, it is karmic continuity. This account is to be found in Yogācāra Buddhism, with its theory of the *ālaya vijñāna*: an aspect of the mind (quite distinct from ordinary consciousness; more like the Freudian sub-conscious) which carries the karmic ‘seeds’.

The karmic theory of continuity provides a criterion of identity across rebirths. Flanagan, however, rejects karma (except as a perfectly naturalistic theory of the effects of one’s actions on oneself and others in this life). Consequently, the theory of rebirth (for which there is no evidence on a Lockean criterion of personal identity) goes out of the window. Many Buddhists will feel that a view without rebirth cannot possibly be called Buddhism (though I personally regard this as a terminological issue of very little interest). It does, though, raise the crucial question of what the *point* of a committed Buddhist life is, if it is not to obtain release from the realm of samsaric rebirth.

Flanagan locates this in a certain conception of human flourishing (eudaimonia) in this life, with its consequent ethical emphasis on virtues. The model perhaps owes more to Aristotle than to traditional Buddhism – though the Buddhist conceptions of both flourishing and the virtues must be quite different from Aristotle’s, as Flanagan explains. Buddhist flourishing involves a life of serenity (so no grasping, no hatred), mindfulness, wisdom, compassion. No Buddhist is going to disagree here. Why live like this, though (if there is no rebirth)? Flanagan’s suggested answer is more in line with Hellenistic philosophers than Aristotle. Such a life gives one the best chance of happiness of a certain kind (though this is by no means guaranteed). Flanagan is clearly sympathetic to this view. Reviewing the literature from experimental psychology, though, he explains, honestly, that, contrary to claims that are sometimes made, the empirical jury on this matter is still out.

So far, Flanagan is reasonably happy with this Neo-Buddhism. He is not a Buddhist, though, as he makes clear at the end of the book. His preferred way of being in the world is (p. 207):

to be and live as a platonic hedonist, to try to maximise pleasures at the places where what is true and beautiful and good intersect. The comfort of living in this space, in so far as there is any, comes from thinking that no answer is right to the question of how one ought to live.

Where he gets off the Buddhist boat is principally over the issue of compassion. (He also worries briefly about how justice fits into the picture (p. 206), but the matter is not pursued in detail.) Buddhism without the virtue of compassion is surely no Buddhism. Flanagan can see no real reason why the virtue of compas-

sion should follow on the above picture. Several reasons are essayed and found wanting. If one believed in trans-life karma, being uncompassionate could be held to have unfortunate repercussions in the next rebirth. But rebirth is out of the picture. Maybe evolution has programmed us to be happier if those immediately around us flourish; but that doesn't get us very far (pp. 160, 179). Being compassionate is a good strategy for breaking a self-centred grasping which is a prime case of unhappiness. That's good psychological counseling, but hardly explains the role of compassion as a virtue (e.g., pp. 159, 181 ff.).

Here is an issue where more sensitivity to the different schools of Buddhism would have been helpful. Theravada Buddhism holds that there are ultimately real things in the world, but these do not include people. There are mental states of unhappiness, suffering, etc. abroad. But, there being no people in the ontology of the world, these do not belong to them. If, then, there is reason to get rid of such states, this is because they are intrinsically bad. It matters not where in the various causal streams they occur. There is no privileging of Flanagan or Priest. This argument was given explicitly by Śāntideva (ironically a Mahāyāna philosopher) in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (VIII: 99–103).

Matters change when we move to Mahāyāna Buddhism and the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Flanagan takes this to be a simple generalisation of the Theravada view of no-self: not only persons, but *all* things depend on their parts (e.g., p. 126 ff). In Mahāyāna, there is dependence on parts; but there are other kinds of dependence as well (not all things may have physical parts). Things also depend on their causes and effects, and on our concepts. (The conceptual dependence, incidentally, is a problem for naturalised Buddhism, since it is at odds with the sort of realism that normally inhabits naturalism.)

Anyway, since everything is empty, there is no ultimate reality. Persons, then, have exactly the only sort of reality that anything can have: conventional. (The distinction between conventional and ultimate reality in various Buddhisms is a very sensitive one. Flanagan, perhaps wisely, largely avoids it.) States of unhappiness, etc., *do* depend on persons, in the only way in which it makes sense to talk about this. Consequently, we can no longer run the Theravada argument (as is argued forcibly by Paul Williams in ch. 5 of his *Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000); and Mahāyāna has no other obvious resources to offer. This is indeed a problem for naturalised Mahāyāna.

In summary, then, scholars and *cognoscenti* of Buddhism may find this a somewhat frustrating book; but all interested in Buddhism may read it and find discussions of interest and value (much of which there is no space here to comment on here). Above all, Flanagan has put on the table the issue of what a naturalised Buddhism is. If Buddhism is to move into the West significantly, I think it will have to go this way. The book, then, opens the way for many important future debates.

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