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Indian and Chinese Thought*

Reviewed by Leah Kalmanson

Drake University

leah.kalmanson@drake.edu

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cozort@dickinson.edu.

A Review of *Encounters of Mind: Luminosity and Personhood in Indian and Chinese Thought*

Leah Kalmanson¹

Encounters of Mind: Luminosity and Personhood in Indian and Chinese Thought. By Douglas L. Berger. Albany: SUNY Press, 2015, 262 pages, ISBN 9781438454740 (paperback), \$24.95.

Douglas L. Berger's *Encounters of Mind: Luminosity and Personhood in Indian and Chinese Thought* is an important work with the potential to make a lasting impact on the methodology of comparative philosophy. In it, we find references to European and Anglo-American philosophy almost entirely absent (despite the author's own proficiencies in both analytic and continental traditions); instead, *Encounters of Mind* offers a sustained comparative study of the Indian and Chinese philosophical interactions that produced the provocative theories of practice and enlightenment in East Asian Buddhism, which in turn carried over into Song-dynasty Confucian accounts of moral development and self-cultivation. Although this will obviously be of interest to scholars in Asian philosophy and Buddhist studies, the book also offers non-specialists an engaging and accessible overview of one of the world's ongoing philosophical investigations into the nature of consciousness.

¹ Drake University. leah.kalmanson@drake.edu.

The book begins with a chapter on the meaning of *xin* (心) or the “heart-mind” in early Chinese thought. Berger offers close readings of extended quotations from primary sources, and he helpfully includes the Chinese text alongside every English-language passage. Given the nuance of the philosophical territory that Berger is exploring, and the often-fraught translation dilemmas that tend to plague comparative philosophy, the reader’s immediate access to the original language serves to forestall a number of ambiguities. The chapter traces the development of what Berger calls “‘Zhuangist’ vocabulary and ideals” (54), whose notion of *shen* (神) or “spirit” builds on but also intervenes in early conceptions of *xin* as the ruler of the body and the source of moral development:

The extraordinarily unique collection that became the *Zhuangzi* then, in very conspicuous contrast to almost everything else in early Chinese thought, while at once affirming widely held tenets about the consciousness of the body and the powers of the heart, aligns genuine personhood with the ‘essential’ and ‘spiritual’ in human beings that transcend the body and even sociality. (54)

This “Zhuangist” intervention in Chinese thought sets the stage for the encounter with Buddhism centuries later. The second chapter turns to early pre-Buddhist thought in the Vedic world, providing context for the philosophical debates that shaped those Buddhist schools that eventually migrate to China. Berger’s admirable facility with literary Chinese, Sanskrit, and Pāli is one of the strengths of this project, and, as in the first chapter, he includes the source language alongside all quoted passages. The second chapter focuses on the influence of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya schools on the later Yogācāra Buddhist portrayal of the luminosity (*prakāśatva*) of consciousness. In the third chapter on Yogācāra we see the beginnings of the debates over the relation between practice and enlightenment that occupied later Chinese thinkers. In particular, Berger traces certain Chinese philosophical trends back to Paramārtha’s translations of Vijñānavāda texts into Chinese in the 500s.

As Berger says, these early translations “gave to Chinese Buddhism not merely a new metaphysical vocabulary but a new access to an ennobling vision of what it means, in the most profound senses, to be a person” (114).

The fourth chapter brings together Chinese discourses on *xin* with Vijñānavāda views on cognition to provide a full and engaging account of the philosophical dilemmas that drove the so-called sudden enlightenment debates and the anti-ritualistic rhetoric of Chan masters such as Linji in the ninth century. Buddhist accounts of the mind’s original clarity and luminosity are, in turn, appropriated by Song and Ming Confucian scholars, which is the topic of the following chapter. There, Berger shows how the fraught relationship between practice and enlightenment in Buddhist thought influences Confucian notions of self-cultivation and sagehood.

In his conclusion, Berger makes a case for the “incorrigible optimism” (197) of Asian philosophical traditions, from early Brāhmiṇical thought through Song-dynasty Confucianism, centered on this notion of the originally luminous mind that makes possible not only basic awareness but also cultivation, enlightenment, and sagehood. As Berger says, the nature of this mind is theorized in different ways, from Brāhmiṇical notions of our “luminous, pure personhood or spirit” to Chinese studies of the behavior of *qi* (氣), which accounts for the natural tendency of the mind to revert to its clear and mirror-like state. In both cases, seemingly super-human transformations are possible through disciplined practices that exploit the mind’s basic character of “luminosity.” On the one hand, Berger describes this optimistic picture of human potential as “a worthy philosophical challenge, even a provocation” (198). On the other, Berger is clear that we cannot meet this challenge without taking seriously the metaphysical theories of personhood that converge on this optimistic provocation: “one or another of these classical metaphysical perspectives on personhood would have to be maintained in order for us to sal-

vage the ethical and axiological beliefs and goals the traditions espouse” (215).

The book ends on a sort of cliffhanger, then, which Berger originally gestured toward in his introduction: “I must admit, if only once and at the outset of this study just to dispense with it honestly, that, though I have only really just begun to grapple with this notion, my current and rather naturalistic inclinations on the idea of consciousness make them difficult to reconcile with the mind’s ‘luminosity’” (7). As Berger goes on to note, other schools (such as Cārvāka or Lokāyata), from the same time periods and traditions that occupy him in the book, have espoused a “depiction of consciousness as a product of strictly physical and natural processes”; and these depictions perhaps conform much more readily to contemporary scientific views on the mind (7–8). The reader is left wanting a sequel, as it were, where Berger more fully realizes his own philosophical response to this stunning study in Indian-Chinese comparative philosophy.

Finally, although Berger does not position the book as an exercise in postcolonial or decolonial methodology, this is a salient feature of his work that I wish to highlight here. In the 1990s Dipesh Chakrabarty issued a call for scholars to “provincialize Europe,”² and in many respects *Encounters of Mind* presents comparative philosophy’s answer to this call. By veering away from the “East-West” trajectory that dominates comparative philosophical research, Berger sets an agenda for future work in the field. His book draws our attention to the trends in intellectual history that characterize the diverse traditions of Asian philosophy, and it urges us to make these trends relevant today, without the intervening mediation of Western thought. Beyond what I find compelling in this book based on its content alone, then, I recommend *Encounters of Mind* to anyone interested in the meta-philosophical and methodological questions of cross-cultural philosophical inquiry.

² Chakrabarty, Dipesh, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History,” *Representations*, no. 37 (1992): 22–23.