

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 23, 2016

*The Ethics of Śāṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response
to an Illusory World*

Reviewed by Joseph S. O'Leary

Independent scholar
josephsoleary@hotmail.com

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:
cozort@dickinson.edu

A Review of *The Ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response to an Illusory World*

Joseph S. O’Leary¹

The Ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response to an Illusory World. By Warren Lee Todd. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013, xii + 220, ISBN: 9781409466819 (hardback), \$149.95.

This searching and instructive book enlarges the current intensive debate on Buddhist ethics by clarifying the ontological foundations of ethical thinking and behavior in Mahāyāna Buddhism and in particular the Madhyamaka tradition. Conversely, it expounds the ontology of emptiness and the twofold truth with an eye to its ethical function. In addition, it reveals close affinities between Śāntideva’s ontology and ethics and those of his contemporary Śaṅkara. Mahāyāna and Vedānta share a set of concerns and strategies, despite Buddhist denial of a permanent self and of Vedic authority and ritual. There is a “cross-cutting” (89) between the two traditions that makes a synoptic study illuminating. The claims that “all is *brahman*” and “all is empty” espoused respectively by

¹ Independent scholar. josephsoleary@hotmail.com.

the two authors are so radical that “they each threaten their own traditions” (47) and make necessary a defense of the conventional practical world as the arena of ascetic striving and of compassionate action. Both Indian thinkers faced the riddle of how ethics can make sense when the “individuated self” is “ultimately denied” (3).

Todd works with three hermeneutical tools: the ontological Two Truths model, a discursive notion of “tension” between the two truths, and a psychological notion of “flickering” or rapid alternation between nirvāṇic consciousness and saṃsāric involvement (27). The discursive “tension” is based on awareness that the two truths “cross over into each other’s domains” (ibid.). But do the two truths have “domains”? Are they not rather distinct perspectives on the same domain? In what sense can conventional become ultimate or ultimate conventional without simply abolishing the distinction of the two truths? “The trick he [Śaṅkara] plays with the reader is then to attack the Yogācāra’s (ultimate) soteriological discourse with a (provisional) ethical argument” (87). But it is normal and even necessary in a two-truths hermeneutic to categorize utterances as ultimate or as conventional and to contest polemically the alternative categorizations in systems that have a different conception of the ultimate. Even within one’s own system one may deny something on the conventional level and affirm it on the ultimate level, or vice versa, without any inconsistency. Śaṅkara agrees with the Yogācārins that ultimately this world is illusory but claims that they do not take this provisional world with due ethical seriousness. There is no “trick” in this typical example of two truths argumentation. “Śaṅkara, like Śāntideva, wants us to see the illusion of the cake *and* eat it” (87-8). This is quite standard, and demands an effort of dialectical thought, which is not met by discussion as to whether Śaṅkara is guilty of hypocrisy, elitism, or arrogance (88). I suspect that to talk of “their focus on traditional ethics and lineage at the price of their ultimate metaphysics” (90) does not do justice to the coherence of the two thinkers.

The model of “flickering” is posited for logical rather than phenomenological reasons. It is difficult to find in the texts, for instance in Śāntideva’s remark that “the work is indeed delusional, but in order to bring about the end of suffering, the delusion which conceives the task is not restrained” (quoted, 23). It is rather Todd’s conception of the tension between the two truths that prompts him to introduce the flicker: “flickering is my way of saving him from contradiction” (ibid.). A fully liberated bodhisattva would be securely established in both ultimacy and conventions, not tossed about by the distractions of multi-tasking. But the psychology of such beings is phenomenologically inaccessible to common mortals and can hardly be reconstructed from texts. Indeed, for Gandhi “the free ethical reign [rein] given by Kṛṣṇa to one without a sense of ‘I’ (Bh.G. 18.17) is in fact written about an ‘imaginary, ideal’ figure. In other words, no such person exists” (22). If so, phenomenology must work with hints drawn from lower-level experience of combining wisdom and compassion, contemplation and action, and it is to this “middle category” of people between nescience and ultimate liberation that the “flickering” model is supposed to apply. Śāṅkara talks of temporary breakthroughs to true reality and “temporary losses of *brahman*-consciousness” (24), but this does not provide a phenomenological basis for the flickering model: “Whether this mode of switching is also to be seen as *erratic* . . . is beyond our knowledge. Whatever the speed and frequency of switching, my argument is that it must take place” (ibid.).

This abstract construction is supposed to be propped up by recent research showing that the higher someone’s level of development the less likely he or she is to indulge “low stage forms of thought and behaviour” and that “most helping behaviours are guided by both egoistic and altruistic goals” (cited, 24, 25). This is not very illuminating, and suggests that the ethical angle of approach can have a diluting or flattening effect. Todd defends Madhyamaka against Śāṅkara by showing that Śāntideva does justice to Śāṅkara’s ethical concerns and uses arguments similar to his. But given the gulf between their ultimate claims (emptiness vs. the Self), this is rather like defending atheism against theism on

the basis that atheists, too, are concerned with ethics and reject false gods.

Śaṅkara offers “no explanation” for the claim that Madhyamaka “contradicts all means of valid knowledge” (88), perhaps because its voiding of perception, deduction, and scriptural authority seemed in itself obvious and confirmed by the disastrous doctrinal result. Ironically, Śaṅkara’s own attitude to the *pramāṇas* is quite close to Nāgārjuna’s (53).

It is regrettable that the only secondary works Todd refers to are in English. On Śaṅkara’s indebtedness to Madhyamaka via Gauḍapāda he might have supplemented Richard King’s *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism* (SUNY Press, 1995) with Christian Bouy’s edition of Gauḍapāda (Collège de France, 2000), and on Śaṅkara he might have drawn on Michel Hulin. On Śāntideva he might have engaged with Ludovic Viévard, *Vacuité (śūnyatā) et compassion (karuṇā) dans le bouddhisme madhyamaka* (Collège de France, 2002), which stresses that nonduality always presupposes a dualism difficult to overcome, contrary to bland claims that deep insight into emptiness automatically produces compassion. Viévard’s stress on judicious balancing of investments in emptiness and compassion, two oxen under one yoke, is phenomenologically more convincing, at least for the lower levels of spiritual experience, than the model of “flickering.”