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Review of Buddhism & Political Theory by Matthew J. Moore

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***Buddhism & Political Theory*. Matthew J. Moore. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. 198 pp. (hardcover), US \$78.00, ISBN 978-0-19-046551-3.**

Buddhism & Political Theory, by Matthew J. Moore, proposes to extract a political theory from the Pali language texts of the Buddhist religious tradition that is palatable to Western academic sensibilities so that it might be ushered into the company of contemporary political and ethical philosophy. “Let me introduce you,” the book in essence says to the world of Western philosophy, “to a long overlooked, unusual, and interesting perspective on political and ethical theory that you really ought to include in your conversations.”

What is striking about this approach to the texts is that it gives so little weight to Buddhism as a *practice*. To be sure, the religious aspirations taken for granted by these canonical texts – elimination of *dukkha*¹, escape from *samsara*², achieving *nibbana*³ – all receive due attention in Moore’s discussion. But only as theoretical set pieces. By which I mean, the teachings are treated as a collection of theoretical concepts that might be brought into a 21st century philosophical conversation. Toward what purpose, though? Why, to make this conversation more diverse and interesting. And what might be the value of that? With that question we run up against another fundamental idea from this same body of teachings, which is that engaging in “speculative theories” is a misuse of one’s energy.

We find this idea particularly in those early discourses that address the topic of the “undeclared questions.”⁴ In such texts, one of the Buddha’s many interlocutors – most famously, Vacchagotta and Malunkyaputta – declare that they are dissatisfied with his refusal to address certain speculative theories, such as whether the world is infinite or not, or whether the body and soul are the same or different. In such dialogues, the Buddha simply refuses to engage in discussion of such topics. The reasons he offers boil down to one simple idea: such speculations do not aid in the effort to eliminate the sources of *dukkha*, and in fact are likely only to contribute to the problem.

¹ *Dukkha* is the term typically translated as “suffering.” As nearly all translators of Buddhist discourses and textual commentators today acknowledge, the term is better rendered as “dislocation,” or “unsatisfactoriness.” It is important to understand that the first Noble Truth, that “life is *dukkha*,” is not a declaration that life is nothing but pain and misery. Rather, the Truth is that as long as ordinary unenlightened people act out of a desire for self-satisfaction, their lives will be filled with dislocation and unsatisfactoriness – even if, like the Buddha himself, they are rich, well-born, good looking, and lead lives of pleasure and ease. I will leave the concept untranslated in what follows, as I do in my teaching.

² *Samsara* is the cycle of rebirth. Since rebirth and *dukkha* alike are caused by attachments, eliminating the second (which is the subject of the Third and Fourth Noble Truths) results also in an end to rebirth. As a result, it is a ubiquitous and unquestioned feature of the early Buddhist discourses (as well as contemporary *Upanisadic* teachings) that life’s highest goal is to escape rebirth.

³ Most readers will be more familiar with the Sanskrit version of this concept, *nirvana*. *Nibbana* is the Pali equivalent.

⁴ See for instance, “The Shorter Discourse to Malunkyaputta (*Cūḷa-māluṅkyā Sutta*),” and “Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire (*Aggivacchagotta Sutta*),” Chs. 8 & 10, respectively, in John J. Holder, editor & translator, *Early Buddhist Discourses*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006), pp. 95-100, 117-122.

From the *practitioner's* perspective that suffuses the early Buddhist teachings, then, *Buddhism & Political Theory* represents a deeply ironic 21st century appropriation of a resolutely practical body of teachings for the purpose of spicing up the conversations of contemporary Western political and ethical theorists. In fairness, Western political and ethical theory could well benefit from the introduction of an ancient and venerable perspective that challenges well-entrenched and questionable assumptions in the field. For that reason, a book such as this could have a useful propaedeutic role to play in the academy.

At the same time, from the standpoint of the teachings themselves (not to mention practitioners who take them seriously) there is something misguided about the whole project. The book treats Buddhist teachings as a theoretical contribution to a theoretical conversation, the substance of which will (from the early Buddhist perspective) contribute nothing to the task of eliminating *dukkha*, and in fact may only add to the problem. From the practical standpoint of early Buddhism, the book is an example of the very kind of activities that the Buddha's teachings discourage.

From the perspective of the contemporary academy, of course, such concerns are moot. Theory is just what its members do. Fair enough. In what follows I will consider *Buddhism & Political Theory* from that perspective. At the same time, respect for the teachings contained in the Pali Canon did seem to call for the preceding observations.

Part I of *Buddhism & Political Theory* is devoted to identifying Buddhism's theory of government. As Moore acknowledges, it is risky to attribute a political theory to "Buddhism" (as a whole), given the many different traditions of Buddhist thought, and given the many different national and cultural contexts in which the Buddhist tradition has found a home. For that reason he first turns his attention to the political theory to be found in the oldest collection of Buddhist texts, the Pali language canon, which is recognized as authoritative by all traditions of Buddhism the world over.

Though the Pali Canon is a voluminous body of writing, there are but a few texts that specifically address issues of government. Moore reviews these to identify what they teach about government. What he finds is that these texts all endorse enlightened monarchy as a political system. Interestingly, though, he also finds quasi-mythical accounts suggesting that monarchical authority originated from a kind of primal social contract. Subsequent to this ur-event, the legitimacy of the king's authority rests on his spiritual righteousness.

From the standpoint of modern political theory, the *Mahāparanibbāna Sutta* provides an interesting moment of dissent. This text recounts how a ruler with territorial ambitions consults with the Buddha about his plans to conquer a neighboring state. In his reply, the Buddha explains that in a previous consultation with the very people the King aspires to conquer, he had advised them to maintain certain practices that, charitably interpreted, amount to a quasi-republican form of governance. The Buddha then proceeds to recommend these practices as the proper way for the community of monks to manage its own affairs. These quasi-republican themes along with the origin of monarchical authority in a primordial social contract represent, as it were, a counter narrative that – as Moore examines in chapter 3 – could be mined and

developed to aid Buddhist nations in their transition to modern forms of representative governance.

It is important to note that Moore distinguishes here between what he calls *theory of government* and *political theory*. The first simply concerns the kind of political regime that the early texts endorse and is the focus of Part I of this book. The second concerns key ideas that form the foundation of this conception of government. He identifies three: the idea that individual identity is both illusory and harmful; a deflationary perspective on the role of politics in human life; and a naturalistic and non-realistic theory of morality. Part II of the book is devoted to exploring those ideas.

Chapters 2 and 3 of Part I examine the extent to which later Buddhist thinking adheres to the political theory found in the Pali Canon. Chapter 2 looks at key texts from both the Theravāda and Mahayana Traditions of Buddhism and finds that, despite other differences, all endorse the basic ideas that concern enlightened monarchy that Moore unearthed from the earlier texts. Chapter 3 then turns to the interesting question of how 20th century Buddhist political leaders managed to reconcile this ancient tradition of monarchical thinking with the republican transformation undergone by Buddhist majority nations during the 20th century. The bulk of this chapter summarizes the work of empirical political scientists who have closely examined these political events. We find among these analysts, Moore shows us, two broad perspectives. One group of scholars suggests that the use of Buddhist teachings to legitimate the transition was simply an exercise in cynical *realpolitik*. The other suggests that the transition to republican forms of government was motivated and justified through a good-faith reinterpretation of the early texts, which highlighted those dimensions that seem to support popular sovereignty. In reviewing this research, Moore finds support for both perspectives.

The upshot of Part I is that Buddhist teachings traditionally endorse an enlightened monarchy, but also acknowledge certain elements of republican governance – in particular, the idea that legitimate government authority originates in an implicit social contract. These republican elements, in turn, allowed 20th century Buddhist leaders to reconcile their traditions with the transformation of their national governments from a monarchical to a representative form.

Part II of the book contains what, for Moore, is clearly the philosophical heart of the matter. While traditional Buddhist teachings support enlightened monarchy, what makes the perspective found in the Pali Canon philosophically interesting are the ideas underlying this theory of government.

Chapter 4 addresses the first of these ideas, the illusion of individual identity, via a comparison between Nietzsche's philosophical psychology and the Buddhist teaching of *anatta*, or "no self." What Moore shows here is that Nietzsche and the Buddhist texts offer strikingly similar analyses concerning the structure of the self. Both reject any notion of a metaphysical self, the idea that there is any kind of enduring, unchanging ontological reality corresponding with a person's phenomenal experience of self. Both carry out analyses demonstrating that the phenomenon labelled "self" is actually a collection of discrete and dynamic psychological processes. Both attempt, with uncertain success, to show how this collection of processes can give rise to a

contingent psychological entity that is the basis for the experience of self, what Moore calls a “persistent self.” Both warn against mistaking this contingent entity as having any enduring ontological reality. In this sense, both insist that the self is an illusion.

Where Nietzsche and the Buddhist teachings differ concerns what they regard as an appropriate response to these insights. Nietzsche famously suggested that insofar as one’s self is actually a labile phenomenon, one should engage in an ongoing project of self-creation. Fundamental to Buddhist teachings, by contrast, is the supposition that attachment to self is a fundamental source of *dukkha* and a cause of rebirth. As a consequence, the practitioner’s task is to abandon any attachment to, investment in, or ideas about the existence of a separate self.

Moore thinks that the Buddhist perspective carries the day. In the first place, textual evidence indicates that even Nietzsche acknowledges that the illusion of self is unnecessary for maintaining a coherent psychological structure, which is the Buddhist default position. Further, in a long engagement with a series of Nietzsche’s interpreters, Moore argues that they are mistaken to suppose that a person’s capacity to commit to normative ideals requires some belief in a persistent self. (Since Nietzsche’s texts are ambiguous on this question, Moore interrogates interpreters who are not.)

Surprisingly, given the task of the book, in the last section of the chapter Moore begs off a detailed discussion of the relevance of these two perspectives on the self to political theory and practice. Instead, in a few paragraphs, he first points out how both Nietzsche and the Buddhist teachings suggest that belief in a metaphysical self is likely to foster antisocial behavior. Then, in a neat move, Moore shows how by acknowledging this possibility Nietzsche forces himself – more or less – to accept the Buddhist perspective. Nietzsche contended that belief in a metaphysical self would give rise to *ressentiment*. Hence the resolute (quasi-) subject must accept the fictitious nature of the self and construct a sense of identity on that basis. Moore argues, though, that if one remains committed, as Nietzsche proposes, to even a self-consciously constructed self, the psychological roots of *ressentiment* may well persist. Just so, the Buddhist tradition would reply. Attachment – especially attachment to fictions – gives rise to *dukkha*.

Chapter 5 addresses the theory of limited citizenship endorsed by the early Buddhist texts. Such theories, Moore tells us, rest on four claims. The first is that political institutions and activity are both inevitable and potentially beneficial. Second, they are morally and practically important enough to require systematic normative guidance. Third, despite the preceding pair of concessions, political institutions and action are nonetheless *less* important than other human concerns. As a result, thoughtful people have good reason to devote relatively little of their time and energy to them. Finally, political institutions and action have little capacity to either help or hinder people in their pursuit of the goals that are, in fact, most important for human life.

After examining passages from the early Pali texts that support a theory of limited citizenship, Moore then reviews representative figures from the Western tradition of political thought who also endorse this perspective: Socrates, Epicurus, Thoreau (at some length) and John Howard Yoder (an American Mennonite theologian).

Moore then turns to the question whether limited citizenship is theoretically defensible. It is here that the book begins to feel hurried. His review of Western political theorists suggests that limited citizenship is an option that the Western tradition of political theory has not taken very seriously. The sequence of charges laid against limited citizenship, to which Moore briefly responds (that it is parasitic, irrelevant, irresponsible, an expression of class privilege, and that it leads to incomplete human development), shows that Western political thinkers consider limited citizenship to be a dangerous idea. In other words, we discover through this discussion that the thinking of the Buddhist tradition about politics seems to challenge some very deeply held Western assumptions. But instead of exploring this tension more fully, Moore simply appeals to value pluralism to resolve it. His argument is plausible, though sketchy, but it does not really do what he wants to do, which is to convince Western political and moral theorists that the Buddhist tradition has got a challenging alternative conception that they need to take seriously.

In Chapter 6, Moore argues that Buddhist ethics represents a version of ethical naturalism. Borrowing Kant's distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives, he contends that the best reading of the early texts reveals a fundamentally descriptive, or "hypothetical" theory of ethics. Certain kinds of actions, the tradition teaches, are more intelligently conceived (more "skillful") than others, not because they conform to some absolute standard of right and wrong, but because they are more or less likely to bring about desirable consequences.

Moore suggests that this ethical perspective should interest contemporary Western political theorists for a number of reasons, but here, again, the discussion is not entirely satisfactory. He contends that early Buddhist thinking could have a place in current conversations about naturalistic and non-naturalistic ethics. Politically, this also means that Buddhist thinking resonates with a Western tradition of political thought that tries to articulate political ethics in an entirely naturalistic language, rejecting appeals to supernatural, mystical, or metaphysical ideas. What troubles me about this suggestion is that it appears simply to assimilate Buddhist thinking to an established set of Western assumptions and priorities. Only to the extent that the thinking of the Pali Canon can fit within Western theoretical norms, the argument seems to imply, will it be "interesting" to Western political and ethical theorists. Whether or not this is correct is an empirical question – Western theorists could just as well ignore these texts for essentially similar reasons, namely, that they do badly or only implicitly what the Western theorists already do explicitly and well. But such considerations seem to miss the question motivating the book, which is whether the Buddhist tradition has something genuinely new or different to offer to conversations in the Western academy. Such a contribution, one imagines, should amount to more than just "fitting in" with the tribe.

This uncertainty of purpose is nicely illustrated by the final sections of this chapter, where Moore turns to an objection raised against hypothetical ethical theories, which is that they won't possess the "normative force" required to constrain human behavior. This objection, he avers, threatens to call into question the capacity of early Buddhist political and ethical thinking to provide a satisfactory justification for republican government institutions. To show how Buddhist ethical theory might address this problem, however, Moore turns to the political theory of William Connolly, who he regards as the most successful contemporary defender of a naturalistic and

non-realist political ethics. But notice what has just happened. The political and ethical ideas of the Pali Canon, which were to bring something fresh and interesting to Western scholarship, suddenly need to be rescued by a Western scholar. Perhaps I am overstating things here. Still, it remains the case that *Buddhism & Political Theory* does not seriously investigate how the naturalist, non-realist position contained in the Pali language texts might be defended on its own terms.

In the end, what *Buddhism & Political Theory* shows us is that early Buddhist thinking anticipates developments in contemporary philosophy. The Pali language texts endorse ethical perspectives that continue to occupy 21st century theorists, engage in a resolute deconstruction of the human subject millennia before Nietzsche (and his poststructuralist readers), and advance ideas of limited citizenship that contradict republican traditions of engaged citizenship so prevalent in the West. And while the early Buddhist texts endorse conceptions of enlightened monarchy, they also contain an undercurrent of popular sovereignty that allowed the tradition to adapt to modern representative political movements. What Moore's book does not show, though, is that early Buddhist thinking offers conceptual or philosophical insights that might destabilize the dogmas of current Western political and ethical theory.

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