
Review

Buddhism and Political Theory

Matthew J. Moore,
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In this readable book, Matthew J. Moore offers the resources for political theorists to see how their own familiar debates might intersect with, and even benefit from, Buddhist philosophy. Its synthetic approach, lucid writing, and short length (only 145 pages not counting footnotes) suggest that this book would best serve as an undergraduate or graduate text for an introductory course in political theory, rather than as a research monograph advancing a new argument within Buddhist philosophy. The content and organization of the book, described by Moore in his short introduction as a “roadmap for other scholars interested in Buddhism” (p. 3), bears out this supposition. (The book also claims to offer references to “good quality English translations”, but no indication is given as to how that quality is assessed, or if Moore possesses the requisite skills in Pali or Sanskrit to determine whether those translations are accurate.)

The first three substantive chapters offer rich descriptions of the key texts and arguments of Buddhism, along with a very quick overview of how Buddhist argumentation has changed during its period of “modernism” since the mid-nineteenth century. Chapter 1 offers its descriptions by way of surveying what it calls the “theory of government and political theory in early Buddhism.” Moore notes that debate exists in the scholarly literature over the extent to which Buddhism supports or offers a place for politics in its theory, and whether that theory supports monarchism or more popular political decision-making. It narrates several short stories or fables from the early Pali canon – such as the story of Dalhanemi, a *cakkavatti* or “wheel-turning monarch,” who advances Buddhist principles through his governance – to argue that Buddhism does possess a distinctive political theory. Among its criteria for good governance is included a theory of legitimacy, which, according to Moore, “is not about adequately respecting the autonomy of rational selves but rather about creating conditions to allow human beings to make spiritual progress” (p. 26). The second chapter similarly offers schematic, short descriptions of key texts to show that for most Buddhists before the nineteenth century, monarchy was the central political system they endorsed. However, in Chapter 3,



Moore goes on to show that this widely shared assumption about the basic feature of Buddhist political society changed rapidly, starting in the 1850s, when Buddhists began harnessing different interpretations to justify democratic change among themselves. This chapter features a dizzying survey of Buddhist modernism in all the world's Buddhist-majority countries, including Bhutan, Thailand, and Tibet, each of which receives about two pages of brief treatment.

The next and final three chapters (aside from chapter 7, which functions mostly as a summary conclusion) provide the “meat” of Moore’s main interpretive point. In contrast to the first three chapters, which present mainly historic exposition and a survey of the key secondary debates on Buddhism, these chapters attempt a more original reading of some Buddhist texts in relation to concepts and arguments from Western political theory. Each chapter explicates one facet of Moore’s claim “that Buddhist political theory rests on three underlying ideas that simultaneously are familiar to Western thinkers and represent positions that almost no Western thinkers have been willing to embrace,” namely, the denial of an existence of the self, the emphasis on the relative lack of importance of politics in human life, and an ethics that is both naturalistic (i.e., arising from natural facts about the universe rather than being god-given) and irrealist (i.e., “moral claims do not reflect obligatory normative truths but rather optional (though wise) advice”) (p. 2).

Chapter 4 examines the Buddhist denial of the self in relation to Nietzsche’s similar claim about “under-souls,” and argues that ultimately Buddha’s theory is preferable “even when assessed using Nietzsche’s own criteria” (p. 65). The chapter begins with an overview of the Buddhist theory of no-self, which offers more details than the introduction’s survey of the same material. It goes on to explain Nietzsche’s theory of the self and argues that the real divergence between the two lies not in their description of the self (which is in many ways congruent) but in their *attitude* toward the self’s multiplicity and seeming lack of metaphysical center (p. 75). Moore argues that only the Buddha’s insistence on abandoning a persistent self offers a way out of Nietzschean existential resentment, even from Nietzsche’s point of view; and moreover that, *contra* Nietzsche and some of his contemporary interpreters, it is capable to live as human with normative goals even without the persistent self (pp. 80–81).

Chapter 5 slots Buddhism into a broader discussion of what the author calls “theories of limited citizenship, East and West” (although it is worth noting that despite the rich examples drawn from the “West” side of that binary, Buddhism is the only theory drawn from the “East” in this chapter). According to Moore, such theories – linked in the Western tradition to such thinkers as Epicurus, Thoreau, and the American Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder – converge with Buddhism in acknowledging politics as an inevitable and even often beneficial feature of the human condition, while also privileging other commitments as more important than politics. While this discussion is fascinating in itself, the distinctive contribution of Buddhist ideas here is less than clear; the book spends only four



pages discussing Buddhist theories of politics, repeating the basic points made in the introductory section. On the one hand, given this relative lack of deep engagement on this point, the reader wonders if the analysis of limited citizenship could proceed equally well without mentioning Buddhism at all. On the other hand, however, Moore here does pursue a strategy for de-exoticizing Buddhism by assimilating it to existing political theory ideas – while at the same time drawing attention to some of those ideas, such as limited citizenship, which do not always feature in mainstream political theory debates.

Finally, Chapter 6 turns to an explicit examination of Buddhist ethics, which historically have received much greater attention from philosophers than have Buddhist theories of politics. Focusing on meta-ethics, Moore argues that Buddhism alone, among the “major religions” (although one wonders why Buddhism is described necessarily as a religion rather than a philosophy, and what is at stake in that description), has a “hypothetical” rather than “categorical” approach to ethics: that is, it offers what it takes to be good advice about how one should act, rather than articulating a series of moral duties that derive from absolute claims about the good. By avoiding appeals to the supernatural, Moore further argues, Buddhist ethics can tie more closely to an existing tradition in Western thought of immanence politics, today associated with such contemporary thinkers as William Connolly, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. This chapter is richly synthetic, offering a very clear overview of existing Anglophone debates about Buddhist ethics and meta-ethics while drawing in contemporary political theory discussions about the conditions of ethical plurality and appropriate responses to it.

Although these three chapters do succeed in exploring each facet of Moore’s interpretation of Buddhism in relation to political theory, they read more like standalone articles, each making an independent point rather than building cumulatively to a larger argument. Along with the long introductory section – which comprises nearly half the page-count of the book – the lack of a singular argumentative thread suggests that the book, while valuable for students, may be less valuable to scholars of Buddhism or to comparative political theorists who already possess basic knowledge of Buddhist ideas. The book draws on an admirably comprehensive set of English-language secondary literature on Buddhist thought, and carefully navigates its way through some key scholarly debates, such as about whether Buddhist ethics is hypothetical rather than categorical. But it does not use its chapters as stepping stones to a larger original intervention in those debates, which – given the relative lack of attention in political theory to this vitally important and globally relevant body of thought – is somewhat unfortunate.

More discussion of how Buddhist ideas might be presented on their own terms, in ways that challenge or displace the commitments of the field, would have been welcome. For example, at the end of Chapter 6, Moore notes that “[William] Connolly’s immanence politics offers one direction that Buddhism could go in developing a more adequate political theory for modernity” (p. 130). This is a



tantalizing suggestion, and one that a reader might reasonably expect a book calling itself “Buddhism and Political Theory” to undertake. Unfortunately, very little of this kind of further development is on view here. This book is, admittedly, lucidly written and serves to introduce very basic knowledge of Buddhism to political theorists and students who may not otherwise encounter it. But those readers looking for an innovative intervention into the existing debates in Buddhist philosophy will likely be disappointed.

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