

Modern Buddha

EVAN THOMPSON

Owen Flanagan
 THE BODHISATVA’S BRAIN
 Buddhism naturalized
 272pp. MIT Press. £22.95 (US \$27.95).
 978 0 262 01604 9

empiricist, and so has the internal resources sufficient to “naturalize” itself. By this, he means rejecting the belief in the immateriality of consciousness in order to make Buddhism consistent with the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection and with “neurophysicalism” – the thesis that every subjective mental event is instantiated by a physical event in the brain, or, to state the thesis in a stronger logical form that Flanagan also favours, is identical to a physical event in the brain.

The second part of *The Bodhisattva’s Brain*, “Buddhism as a Natural Philosophy”, explores the implications for moral psychology and philosophy of the central Buddhist thesis of “no-self”, the view that there is no substantial self that is wholly present from moment to moment, but only a causal continuum of transitory psychophysical events. These chapters defy summary, for they range widely across various schools of Buddhist philosophy, ancient Greek philosophy and contemporary Western philosophy, and psychology and neuroscience. Flanagan’s overall aim, which he achieves with forceful elegance, is to show that a naturalized version of Buddhist philosophy offers important new resources for what he calls “eudaimonics”, the philosophical and scientific study of the causes and constituents of human flourishing.

The Bodhisattva’s Brain needs to be seen in the context of what historians call “Buddhist modernism”. Since the nineteenth century, one of the striking features of the Buddhist encounter with modernity has been the way both Asian Buddhists and Western Buddhist converts have argued that Buddhism, unlike other religions, especially Christianity, is not only compatible with science, but contains a kind of “mind science” – a precise specification of how the mind works and of how proper mental training leads to liberation from mental suffering. This was the principal strategy Anagarika Dharmapala used in combating Christian colonialism in his native Ceylon and in his promotion of Theravada Buddhism in the West, as William James heard at Harvard. But of course this strategy cuts both ways; it requires that Buddhism be open to critical examination from the side of science. Thus, Buddhist modernism provokes – and sometimes invites – the kind of naturalistic critique that Flanagan takes up.

Flanagan’s version of this critique, however, worries me in two ways. First, Flanagan writes as if the status of consciousness were a settled matter. But explaining consciousness remains the outstanding scientific and philosophical problem of our time. There is a profound explanatory gap

between our understanding of the brain and our understanding of consciousness: we do not understand how a subjective, experiential state could be an objective, physical state, and, at present, we have no hint of a solution to this problem. Given this situation, it is crucial to distinguish between naturalism as a general epistemological and methodological stance – the commitment to the possibility of a scientific understanding of consciousness – and neurophysicalism, which is a specific metaphysical thesis. Naturalism does not entail neurophysicalism. Another naturalist option, for example, is that we need to revise the materialist concept of the “physical” in order to account for consciousness as a natural phenomenon. On this view, no objectivist concept of the physical – one that by design excludes the mental – will suffice to account for consciousness and its place in nature.

This brings me to my second misgiving. One of the great strengths of Buddhist philosophy, specifically of the Madhyamaka (“middle way”) school, is its precise and rigorous critique of objectivism – the conviction that there is a ready-made world “out there” on to which our concepts directly fasten. From the Madhyamaka perspective, concepts such as “natural” or “physical” are “conventional designations” – useful and powerful constructs for certain purposes, but ones which, like all concepts, are grounded in human cognitive practices, not in any mind-independent reality. Flanagan’s concept of the “natural” looks like what Madhyamaka philosophers call a “reification” – something believed mistakenly to have its own intrinsic and objective being. The Madhyamaka arguments that negate this concept of intrinsic being also imply that whatever counts as “nature” cannot be understood apart from human cognitive practices, and therefore cannot be given absolute explanatory primacy over mind. In this way, Madhyamaka can be seen to parallel Western critiques of objectivism, such as those found in Husserl, Wittgenstein or Hilary Putnam.

Flanagan does not consider this kind of critical Buddhist rejoinder to his naturalism. In these ways, his project remains one of assimilating certain Buddhist ideas to one particular Western viewpoint, instead of allowing the dialogue to subject that viewpoint, too, to philosophical scrutiny. We need such scrutiny, however, in order for the dialogue to be a full and open one, and to bring to light promising philosophical pathways we might otherwise miss (such as naturalism without objectivism).

In mentioning these misgivings, my aim is to highlight some of the profound and complicated issues that Flanagan’s book raises. That philosophers can now take up these issues is a testament to the book’s originality and depth. Owen Flanagan writes with warmth, wisdom and wit. *The Bodhisattva’s Brain* is a milestone of cosmopolitan thought and should be read widely by philosophers, cognitive scientists, theologians and anyone concerned with human flourishing and the meaning of life.

matics, or the intrusion of selfishness, that are enemies of a good response to things. Conventions, cultural stereotyping, lack of practice, simple lack of experience, and even an over-developed altruism can all play their role as well, as several writers here point out.

Plato also had his adept return to the Cave as leader and guide, whereas Murdoch is more reticent about whether superior moral vision actually leads you to do much, apparently fearing that only “behaviourists” need to think so (a torpedo that needs firing alongside Moran’s could be aimed at her treatment of Gilbert Ryle). Indeed, in her most famous example of an improved moral take on something, she actually specifies that a mother-in-law’s increasingly just and loving appreciation of her son’s wife brings no change in her behaviour whatsoever. She is apparently not inclined to smile at her more, or more genuinely, to listen more patiently, or to spend more time with her, “however favourable the circumstance”.

If this is Goodness, one might think, it’s not much cop. The danger lies in the close comparison with aesthetics. There is not much for spectators to do about great art except to absorb it, whereas there may be a lot to do about your daughter-in-law. But the example also illustrates a rather alarming tendency for Murdoch to draw her good women in especially droopy terms. As Lovibond laments in a particularly insightful chapter (“What Is She Afraid Of?”) in her excellent, forgiving, but ultimately disappointed discussion of Murdoch and feminism, Murdoch’s heroines “detach themselves from all good things and wait”, radiating only “beneficent lumpishness”, or placid “thing-in-itselfness”, while Murdoch herself clearly displays an “animus against real-life, articulate feminism”. Few contemporary women will appreciate an ethic of dumb worship, obedience and subservience in which women are sanctified insofar as they resemble puddings. Clearly the slogan “ni dieu, ni maître” had little resonance for Murdoch. It is one of the virtues of Lovibond’s insightful essay to recognize that Murdoch’s own penchant for a world of Hampstead master-thinkers playing games with their humid coteries of adoring disciples is one that we should not want to share.

Murdoch was clearly an enormously intelligent and attractive person. But quite apart from her slanted versions of other philosophers, I am not sure about the overall quality of her just and loving attention to her world. Broackes’s authors are suitably high-minded, but a rare light note is given by Martha Nussbaum’s anecdote of lunch at Murdoch’s grand but notoriously squalid home in Oxfordshire. Only a fatty pâté, which “Murdoch ate absent-mindedly with her fingers”, and cherries were on offer, neither of which Nussbaum could stomach. Yet, she affirms, after being subjected to Murdoch’s unnerving gaze, “I had no doubt . . . that Murdoch could have described me, after an hour, far more precisely than any lover of mine after some years”. One cannot, of course, speak for Professor Nussbaum’s lovers, but if a hostess was unable to tell when her guest was nauseated by the food, one might doubt their vast yet hidden powers of observation. Or perhaps Murdoch, undoubtedly neglectful of her guest, was being malicious rather than obtuse. In any event, not much by way of manifesting the Good – but there wasn’t a pudding in sight.

In 1904, William James heard a Sinhalese Buddhist named Anagarika Dharmapala lecture at Harvard University on the Theravada Buddhist view of the mind. Afterwards, James rose and proclaimed to the audience: “This is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now”. James’s prediction proved to be too optimistic, but it may yet come true. Today, studies of the effects of Buddhist meditation practices on the brain and behaviour appear almost every month in scientific journals, while cognitive scientists are devising new ways to investigate the mind and brain with experimental participants who have refined their attentional skills through long-term meditation practice. Meanwhile, a growing number of Western philosophers are taking an interest in Buddhist theories of mind, as well as Buddhist ethical theories.

Owen Flanagan’s *The Bodhisattva’s Brain* examines this contemporary Western encounter with Buddhism. Flanagan, a distinguished philosopher of mind and moral philosopher, engages with Buddhism both as a 2,500-year-old tradition containing profound and sophisticated metaphysical, epistemological and ethical theories, and as a living tradition of thought and practice offering crucial resources for human flourishing. He is highly critical of what he views as Buddhist superstition – the traditional Buddhist beliefs in rebirth, karma and nirvana – and of the exaggerated claim (made mostly by science journalists) of meditation leading to happiness, which neuroscience has supposedly shown. Flanagan offers us “Buddhism naturalized”, a Buddhism – or a Buddhist-informed philosophy of life – shorn of commitment to anything non-naturalistic.

The Bodhisattva’s Brain is divided into two parts. The first, “An Essay in Comparative Neurophilosophy”, examines Buddhist views of flourishing, or what Flanagan calls “eudaimoniaBuddha”, which he carefully distinguishes from other views of flourishing, such as “eudaimoniaAristotle” or “eudaimoniaHedonist”. Flanagan shows how flourishing is conceptually and normatively distinct from happiness and may not suffice for happiness. Thus, wisdom, virtue and mindfulness constitute eudaimoniaBuddha, but happiness – even happiness on a Buddhist conception (“happinessBuddha”) – may require additional outer and inner conditions (friends, material comforts, absence of physical pain, and so on).

Flanagan also shows how neuroscience alone cannot reveal the causes and constituents of flourishing and happiness. The principal reason is obvious, though often strangely forgotten in this age of neuroscience hype: these conditions are located not only in the head, but also in the rest of the body and in our relationships to the natural and social world. Flanagan’s patient and precise critique of the neuroscience of happiness in the light of this fundamental truth should be required reading.

Part I also contains a chapter on Buddhist epistemology and science. Its central thesis is that Buddhist epistemology is strongly