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*Buddhist Philosophy and the Embodied Mind: A Constructive Engagement*, by Matthew MacKenzie, New York, Rowan & Littlefield, 2022, viii + 187 pp., USD \$105.00 (hardback).

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## BOOK REVIEW

## Interrogating constructive realism about the self from a Buddhist perspective

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Matthew MacKenzie's *Buddhist Philosophy and the Embodied Mind* is, indeed, a constructive engagement between Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and enactive cognitive science. The book is concise and clearly written and continues the tradition begun by Varela et al. (1991) in forging connections between the philosophy of cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy. MacKenzie's book will be welcome to scholars who are versed in the philosophical terrain as well as to newer readers who would like to understand some of the philosophical underpinnings of the Buddhism-Science dialog that has captured the public's intellectual imagination. MacKenzie's engagement with the philosophical foundations of enactive cognitive science is especially sharp and illuminating. In this short review, I will offer some critical remarks by defending Buddhist philosophy from some of MacKenzie's criticisms.

MacKenzie endorses a view I call "constructive realism" about the self. This is the view that the self is built up out of selfless psychological processes but is still real. MacKenzie situates his view as a middle-path (Buddhist pun intended), "... in contrast to both substantialists and eliminativists" (MacKenzie, 2022, p. 12). The former reifies the self into a substance; the latter hastily rejects its existence. MacKenzie's main target on the Buddhist side is Abhidharmic Buddhism; these philosophers reject the existence of the self (*ātman*) by reductively analyzing it in terms of the dense causal interactions of momentary mental and physical tropes called *dharma*-s. MacKenzie's way out of the impasse between substantial and reductive conceptions of self is to, "... argue for a conception of the self as constructed by an active, embodied, embedded, self-organizing process of self-making or 'I'-making (*ahamkāra*)" (MacKenzie, 2022). MacKenzie deploys the term *ahamkāra* here as a positive description of how the real self is constructed. But for Buddhist philosophers, self-making is a pernicious form of enclosure and perpetuation that must be eradicated for liberation from suffering to be achieved. Construing this constructive process as a descriptive middle-path between substantialism and eliminativism obfuscates the normative dimensions of this notion in Buddhist thought. Buddhist philosophers admit the reality of self-construction but claim that it should be understood as a profound predicament. While MacKenzie is alive to the normative/descriptive distinction, and the ways in which it seems to collapse in Buddhist thought (MacKenzie, 2022, pp. 80–1), this understanding did not seem to be actively at work in MacKenzie's reading of Buddhist philosophy. This will become clearer as we look more carefully at MacKenzie's treatment of Abhidharma philosophy.

MacKenzie's worry about Abhidharmic philosophy is twofold. First, he thinks it's false on the grounds that it doesn't have the internal resources to adequately describe

the nature of agency and self. Secondly, he thinks that historically it can't adequately capture the richness of what the early Buddhist compilers were getting at in their views on dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) (MacKenzie, 2022, p. 20). I am going to focus on the first worry (for a treatment of the second, see Smith, 2021). MacKenzie claims that "Sentient beings are not sufficiently decomposable (if decomposable at all) to be exhaustively analyzed and explained in terms of the intrinsic properties and causal powers of independently specifiable components" (MacKenzie, 2022, p. 24). I think that the Abhidharmic philosophers have some resources at their disposal to answer these worries. For starters, the Abhidharmic system of mental and physical events (*dharma*-s) is thick with phenomenality, agency, intention, and all kinds of "personal" mental phenomena. Each *dharma* is specifiable as a part of a larger network, but no *dharma* exists on its own, all are dependently originated. In addition to consciousness (*viññāna*), the life-faculty (*jīvitindriya*), intentions (*cetanā*), feelings (*vedanā*), and volitional formations (*saṃskārā*), all seem like system components that can be understood collectively to *constitute* the "global" level of cognitive function. Thus, we can understand the Abhidharmikas as giving a nuanced analysis of the constitution of the personal which does not reify the multi-faceted self-perpetuating system into a single thing. It's not clear to me that we need to think of their activity as "micro-causal" in a way that runs afoul of the kind of autopoietic integration that MacKenzie thinks is central to the constitution of agency and subjectivity. I doubt that MacKenzie would be convinced by this. My point is not to refute his view, which is quite nuanced and plausible. Rather, I am just trying to point out that there are philosophically and historically nuanced ways of reading Abhidharmic philosophy that *might* be able to meet the challenges MacKenzie sets it.

One more example: MacKenzie further argues that Abhidharmic philosophy is ill-equipped to adequately explain what he calls "creature subjectivity" (MacKenzie, 2022, pp. 29–30):

... it seems the Abhidharma reductionist can affirm that these events are like something in the phenomenal sense. However, the classic Nagelian gloss on phenomenal consciousness includes more than this: "what it's like for the organism," where this implies not just that the events occur within the organism but also that qualitative events are manifest in the organism's subjective experience in the right kind of way. In short, phenomenal consciousness involves what it is like *for a subject*.

Rupert Gethin (1994) and I (2020) have both argued at length against this reading of Abhidharma. In the Pāli Abhidhamma, the concept of *bhavaṅga citta* plays precisely this individuating role; it is a form of sentience that is particular to the kind of being having it and is distinct from other forms of consciousness. Again, whether Pāli Abhidharmikas like Buddhaghosa are capable of meeting the explanatory demands on providing an adequate conception of creature subjectivity is an open question. I have raised questions about this myself (cf. Smith, 2020, p. 478 ff.). Others are more optimistic (Ganeri, 2017; the latter of which MacKenzie cites approvingly at 2022, 91; Heim, 2014). The point is that Abhidharmic philosophers have been actively engaged with this issue. In his enthusiasm for biologically informed realism about the agential self in enactive cognitive science, MacKenzie neglects a careful and considered analysis of the range and depth of Abhidharmic philosophy.

MacKenzie further claims that what marks the emergence of the self is "enhanced psychological capacities" of control and flexible responsiveness to the world (MacKenzie, 2022, p. 35). The obvious Buddhist response is that the perfection of

agency is achieved through selfless action. Again, Buddhists are committed to the claim that self-making is a kind of encumbrance. The distinction between something's having evolved to enhance our capacity for integrated *samsāric* continuity on the one hand, and the absence of selfing as necessary for radical spiritual freedom, on the other, seems relevant but unexplored.

MacKenzie then presses an ethical argument against Buddhist reductionism about the self, which Śāntideva seems to fall into at [BCV 8.98–103](#). Against this apparent lapse, MacKenzie claims that: “The home ground of morality here is the interpersonal point of view, but by attacking egocentrism with the claim that the subjects of suffering do not exist and that suffering does not belong to anyone, we may begin to lose our grip on the moral importance of suffering and on how it is to be prevented. Put simply, if an instance of pain doesn't really hurt anybody (there is no one to be hurt!), then why does it matter?” (MacKenzie, 2022, p. 148). Śāntideva explicitly addresses these questions in the ninth chapter of *BCV*, but MacKenzie does not consider Śāntideva's answer to the objection. Here it is ([BCV 9.75–6](#)):

[Objection] Whose is the task to be done, if there is no being?

[Mādhyamika] True. Moreover, the effort is made in delusion, but, in order to bring about an end to suffering, the delusion of what has to be done is not prevented.

Note the sophistication of the response. Śāntideva is here telling us that the objection is precisely correct. It is correct in the sense that there is no problem to solve for a person who does not exist. Get there if you can. But the effort to extract oneself or to help another is “made in delusion” with an aim to eradicate that delusion. There is a pragmatic thrust here that makes the agency involved in addressing suffering necessary to the degree required to relinquish suffering. The extent to which suffering is understood as of ultimate concern is indexed to the degree of understanding – or lack thereof – of the person suffering. The force of the reductionist move derives from the fact that persons and diachronic identity at the conventional level *are* morally significant *precisely because* of their ultimately illusory nature. It is our habit to construct ourselves under the delusion of this kind of substantiality that creates suffering ([BCV 9.77](#)). Suffering is eradicated when a person fully inhabits the ultimate level of reality by relinquishing all self-making.

Śāntideva's move invokes a kind of abandonment of the means when the end is achieved, a central piece of Buddhist soteriology that MacKenzie dismisses in favor of a reconstructed ethical agent:

But why not simply abandon any notion of self, no matter how impermanent or interdependent it is taken to be? In one sense, the reconstruction of a postegological sense of self is merely a skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*)—other sentient beings are still trapped in the delusion of self, and the bodhisattva maintains a sense of self in order to benefit them. However, it may be that a sense of self is not simply an optional tool for the practitioner of the bodhisattva path. If the moral domain is constitutively interpersonal and the domain of empathy and empathic perception, then to abandon a sense of self (and other) is to abandon the moral domain itself. Some of the rhetoric of enlightenment suggests this kind of transcendence of the moral. Be that as it may, for one struggling to cultivate a wise and active altruism, abandoning self and other entirely does not seem to be a viable option, and it is not an option Śāntideva suggests here. Rather, recognition of the utter nonexistence of the substantial self and the emptiness of the conventional self opens up the possibility of a reconstruction of self on the basis of bodhicitta, as opposed to the afflictions (MacKenzie, 2022, pp. 150–1).

MacKenzie is too dismissive of the ways in which for many Buddhists – arguably, including Śāntideva – morality is not the highest aim of praxis. The so-called “rhetoric of enlightenment” is not just rhetoric. The similes of the water-snake and raft (Majjhima et al. 2005) - where the teaching is construed as dangerous if misused and only expedient when properly used – are not just inspirational images. They are vital pieces of Buddhist soteriology which provide instruction on how to relate psychologically to the teachings. My concern is that MacKenzie’s reconstruction of Buddhist philosophy is so thoroughly *samsāric* that he misses something distinctive of Buddhism, its radical claims about what constitutes a form of spiritual freedom worth wanting (for more, see Potter, 1991, ch. 1).

In conclusion, MacKenzie’s engagement with Buddhism and enactivism is constructive and insightful; his treatment of enactive cognitive science, in particular, is astute. Regarding Buddhist philosophy, my worry is that MacKenzie is not sufficiently careful with the primary source material and relevant secondary literature for his criticisms of Buddhism to land with force for those working deeply within that tradition. By contrast, since MacKenzie’s treatment of enactive cognitive science fares much better, I worry that for the enactivist with little background in Buddhism, the relevance of Buddhist philosophy might seem anachronistic considering MacKenzie’s consistently critical attitude toward it. That said, the book is well written and will be informative for those wanting a philosophical way into this terrain and will provide food for thought for those already treading its ambiguous paths.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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