



Monima Chadha

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Monima Chadha, *Selfless Minds: A Contemporary Perspective on Vasubandhu's Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. x + 222, US\$80.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780192844095.

Monima Chadha has written a marvelous and pithy book. At just over 200 pages, she has managed to traverse a remarkable amount of philosophical territory with precision and poise. This review offers some comments about what makes the book worth reading and lays out some questions and concerns that came up for me in reading it.

The introduction and first two chapters do a good job of giving some historical context for the main arguments of the book and she helpfully concludes with two chapters that address normative and existential questions about the Buddhist path out of suffering. My good-hearted criticism here is that the book could have benefited from being much longer. The middle chapters 3–7 explain various permutations of how to use analytic philosophy to reconstruct a version of Vasubandhu's no-self—and for Chadha, no-person—view. These chapters are an extension of the kind of cross-cultural work that the field has come to expect from Chadha; they are meticulous, deep, and provocative. By contrast, chapters 1 and 2 that start out, and chapters 8 and 9 that conclude the work, are less thorough. This is not to say that they aren't excellent, but the reader is left wanting more because the depth of the main analysis is arguably motivated by, and ultimately grounded in, further questions about historical context and ethical soteriology, the latter of which just don't get as much treatment in the book.

In her opening chapter, Chadha offers a very modernist conception of Buddhism: 'Buddhism is best not thought of as a religion, or even a systematic ethical theory'. She then claims that 'Buddhism is best thought of as a way of life with a rich philosophy supporting it' (24–25). Buddhism is many things, a religion among them. However philosophically edifying it might be to construe Buddhism as a 'way of life'—which it is—this doesn't mean it is any more or less a way of life than Catholicism, the latter of which is certainly also a religion. These kinds of reconstructions of Buddhism are a conceit of modernism (McMahon 2008). I am, in fact, quite fond of such a construal of Buddhism as it fits my intellectual and spiritual sensibilities. But that doesn't mean that such a construal gives us a true analysis of what Buddhism is all about on its own terms. For every modernist friendly aspect of Buddhism one might alight upon to rationalize such a construal, there is an equally dogmatic one with which to contrast it (Thompson 2020). As living, breathing readers of this tradition, we have to take ownership of the selective choices we are making in what aspects we center in our analyses and not make the mistake of thinking that we have managed to articulate the actual core of the tradition at the expense of the religious chaff.

Further to this point, I disagree with Chadha that:

According to the Abhidharma tradition, meditation is not conceived as an independent investigative method leading to new discoveries about the mind and the world. Rather, the idea is that meditative practice is the key to turn principles that are first proven through scriptural study and rational inquiry—for example, impermanence, not-self, and emptiness—into objects of experience. (24–25)

For a claim like this to be substantiated, we would need some real source material exegesis, and we are just not getting that here (Shuluman 2014 makes a strong case for this

view based on the Pali sutta literature). To be clear, I agree that such an interpretation is, philosophically speaking, probably the best way to go. But in contrast to Chadha, it's just not clear to me that Abhidharma philosophers think this way on their own terms. Rather, I think it likely that many of them *do* think of meditative contemplation as a kind of 'empirical investigation' which yields knowledge of ultimate reality. This leads to a related point on the connection between Abhidharma metaphysics and soteriology. Chadha claims that,

The Abhidharma Buddhist no-self and no-person revisionary metaphysics aims to produce a "better" structure that is motivated by the normative goal of eliminating, or at least reducing, suffering. So, one has to be really careful about interpreting the famous Abhidharma Buddhist saying that their metaphysics and epistemology aim at "knowing things as they really are." The purpose of the Buddhist revisionary metaphysics is not to describe a scheme that captures the true structure of reality. The Buddhists are concerned with the structure that allows humans to achieve the highest goal, nirvāṇa or enlightenment. (161–62)

I don't think it's right to read Buddhist philosophers of any stripe—except for perhaps Madhyamikas (and even that is a *very* tentative claim)—as eschewing an account of how things really are in favor of a pragmatic goal. Rather, Buddhist philosophers think that one can only make progress towards an end of suffering by knowing things as they are. This is why in his brief auto-commentary on verse 2a of the first chapter of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Vasubandhu defines *prajñā* in terms of discernment of the *dharma*-s (Pruden 1988: 56). In this way, Buddhist concepts should be understood as 'onto-valuational' (Leder 1990: 157). They don't see these two ways of talking as distinct. One achieves wisdom (*prajñā*) through an accurate discernment of the ultimate nature of reality, which for Abhidharmikas like Vasubandhu, is explained as the momentary dependent arising of *dharma*-s. To achieve the highest goal, one must see reality as it is.

I now turn to Chadha's use of a form of argument that shows up several times in the book's inner chapters. She uses this argument to conclude that there is no pre-reflective feeling of authorship of action (139), or ownership of experience (149). The argument looks something like the following:

- (1) The feeling of authorship of action or ownership of experience is not a 'determinate quale', it is not the content of our experience.
- (2) If there is no determinate quale of authorship or ownership, then there is no experience of an author or a subject.
- (3) Therefore, there is no experience of an author or a subject.
- (4) If there is no experience of an author or a subject, then there is no author of action or subject of experience.
- (5) Therefore, there is no author of action or subject of experience.

I think the second premise of this argument is false. It does not follow from the absence of a determinate *quale* that one does not have an experience of being an agent or a subject. The phenomenal character of subjectivity and agency is derived from the mode of givenness of the content of one's experience (Zahavi 2008) and the exercise of one's capacity to self-determine and guide one's actions over time (Vellemans 1992; Korsgaard 2009). It is, to use Chadha's phrasing—and here, we agree—structural. We experience that structure through its enactment. But in acknowledging this, I do not wish to be a realist about the self or the agent (cf. Thompson 2014: Ch. 10).

Instead, I submit, that acknowledging the structural reality of the subjective character of experience does not commit anyone to robust realism about the self. The activity of selfing (*aham'kāra*) is precisely what Buddhists acknowledge as the maintenance of *saṃsāric* continuity. The self-as-process is real, it is the problem that needs to be solved by understanding its seamless functioning as the glue which binds a karmic subject together in order to perpetuate suffering.

A final thought concerns Chadha's construal of Vasubandhu's reductionism about selves and persons and how this should shape our normative thinking about how to live. Chadha claims that

Just as terms like "chariot" and "lamp-light" are only conventional expressions that signify entities constructed from material elements assembled together to serve an interest or purpose, so, also, terms like "person," "self," etc., are only conventional expressions to signify mental and physical elements assembled together to serve certain social and legal purposes and interests. We should not be misled into thinking that there are such things in the world. (150)

Here I want to suggest there are such things in the world and that even the strictest Buddhist reductionist can and should embrace that conclusion. What a Buddhist reductionist should deny is that the referents of person-terms are singular entities or substances. Instead, the referents of such terms are *causally organized pluralities*: they are piles or aggregates. So far, I don't think Chadha would disagree. But she goes on to claim that

All boundaries between people are fabricated resulting from a false belief in an enduring and separate self. Selfish interests and a special concern for our own well-being have no basis in reality but are the result of self-delusion. (193)

I don't think this can be true. I understand Abhidharmic Buddhist philosophers like Vasubandhu to defend a less radical claim, one that permits intuitive individuation practices for persons. The boundary conditions between distinct organized pluralities are established by a beginningless karmic entanglement, one that is more than dense enough to give us individuation conditions for persons-as-piles and reference conditions for person-level terms. The organized plurality that bears the name 'Sean' is spatio-temporally distinct from other such organized pluralities. The physical *dharma*-s that realize the living body of 'my' organism and the psychological *dharma*-s that constitute the flow of 'my' mental life distinguish me spatio-temporally from other aggregations of *dharma*-s. Although none of us are ultimately substantial selves, we are all spatio-temporally distinct persons whose liberation we must author individually through practice of the eightfold noble path.

In conclusion, Chadha's book is well worth reading. It got me thinking and that is the goal of any good book of philosophy. It forced me to think about familiar territory in new ways. In doing so I found lots of agree with and the places where I disagree were sites of edifying reflection.

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