Buddhism and Postmodernity: Zen, Huayan, and the Possibility of Buddhist Postmodern Ethics (review)

Sor-Ching Low

Philosophy East and West, Volume 62, Number 3, July 2012, pp. 417-420
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: 10.1353/pew.2012.0049

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pew/summary/v062/62.3.low.html
does not have to represent greed, since it could be regulated socially in the economy to ensure that both productivity and social cohesion are fostered. In any case, a refusal to offer interest would surely encourage the hoarding of wealth and discourage investment, and as a result society as a whole will be disadvantaged. It is not impossible to devise methods of regulating interest so that it does not burden borrowers and also hamstring them in the future if conditions suddenly change and make it difficult for them to discharge the debt. Indeed, this is what the common law in the Anglo-American legal tradition generally does, although Azhar does not make this point. Case law in most Western countries does sharply distinguish which debts have to be paid and which do not, how interest may eventually be avoided, and what the consequences are for those who fall on hard times. Those consequences are often not pleasant, but then they generally are not tragic either, since we tend to think that those unable to satisfy their obligations should be able, after a certain period, to operate in the market again as though they had. This is because such an arrangement is in the general interest, and not just the interest of those who fell afoul of an agreement that they voluntarily agreed to.

If there is any criticism to be made of this book it is that the author does not adequately look within the resources of Islamic theory itself for theories of the state and general welfare that could quite easily cope with devising a theory of the market and the state that would allow them to be aligned in terms of social justice. He also does not acknowledge the intellectual resources that exist outside Islamic law within the Western traditions that could also be readily employed to buttress the sort of regulation that he wants to import into any Islamic banking system of regulation. These are minor cavils, though, at what will for a long time be the major work on the topic of the Islamic economy. Little that I have just written adequately describes the richness of this book, which on almost every page includes intriguing and suggestive comments on a large variety of issues dealing with Islamic civilization. I have not written about the author’s grasp of economics itself, which is extensive, and altogether this is one of the most satisfying books on the topic I have read for a long time.


Reviewed by Sor-Ching Low  Independent Scholar sorching.low@gmail.com

_Buddhism and Postmodernity: Zen, Huayan, and the Possibility of Buddhist Postmodern Ethics_ by Jin Y. Park is both an ambitious and fascinating book. Its ambition can be seen in its reach—Zen Buddhism, Huayan Buddhism, and their resonance with postmodern ethics—and what it attempts to accomplish. It is a fascinating book for the cogency with which Park attempts to dispel century-old suspicions of Buddhism as a “religion of nothingness” or, worse, one that is disdainful of philosophers,
and for her valiant attempt to reframe Buddhism as a worthy ethical partner in con-
versation with the West by re-envisioning ethics in the context of Zen and Huayan
along with postmodernism. Buddhism was long accused of lacking a definitive eth-
ical strategy toward social issues, and mired in a history of (mis)interpretation led by
Western philosophers, culminating in Hegel’s recasting of its “non-substantialist”
position through the lens of metaphysics. Park’s enterprise, which becomes evident
only in the second half of her book, attempts to envision Zen ethics through Huayan
phenomenology and to propose a dialogue, which she does with some success.

All this is part of an overarching effort to bring Buddhism from the periphery to
the center of Western philosophical discussions on ethics. As Park says at the begin-
ning of her book, this work is a response to some of the problems that have emerged
in the process of Buddhism’s encounter with modernity and the West. And none is
more intriguing than the Buddha’s silence when asked certain questions. Park revisits
Malunkyaputta’s tenfold inquiry to the Buddha, which was posed from two distinct
philosophical questions: the eternalist position and the annihilationist (or materialist)
position pertaining to metaphysical issues.

A second theme of the book revolves around the meaning and function of vio-
lence in the Zen Buddhist tradition. This section expertly brings together two genera-
tions of scholarship on Zen in the West: the first tending to romanticize it and the
second more willing to vilify it. The latter cites Japanese Zen Buddhism’s role in
Japanese imperialism and nationalism during World War II as evidence of how Zen
practice is in reality discrimination more than nondualism, and violence more than
harmony. Park addresses these seemingly contradictory strands by asking, what if Zen
Buddhism’s claim to ineffability is both real and rhetorical? And what if its identity
involves a focus on both meditation and secular worldly rituals?

Without neglecting historical responses from within the Buddhist tradition to this
conundrum, Park launches an engaging discussion by recasting the issues of violence
and language in postmodernist terms in her attempt to seek a meaningful response.
For example, to reframe our understanding of violence in language in Zen Buddhism,
she reminds us of Derrida’s injunction that the very act of naming and making dis-
tinctions is itself violence and that even so it does not offer us the option to throw out
the use of language.

The first two sections of the book, though important in their own right, function
mostly as background to the third and most important theme in Park’s book: the
problem of ethics and where Buddhism stands—in particular Zen because of its
radical challenge to dualistic categorizations and antinomian tendency. In taking on
this problem, Park believes herself to be making a defense for postmodern philo-
sophy as well. Her insight that both Buddhism and postmodern philosophy have a
shared problem in ethics, or are often perceived this way, is not an inaccurate one.
Both their claims for non-identity of identity, interconnectedness of opposite cate-
gories, and lack of a transcendental foundation of an entity have often been seen as
grounds for a disregard for ethics, or at best an apathy toward it. Throughout her dis-
cussion Park navigates easily between postmodernists such as Kristeva, Lyotard, and
Derrida, and Buddhist interpreters such as Nagarjuna and the interpreters of the
Huayan jing (Flower Garland Sutra). Her success in bringing two important strands together effectively bridges Buddhism and Western philosophical discourse.

What is especially refreshing for scholars of Buddhist philosophy is Park’s presentation of Huayan philosophy by some of Buddhism’s most important exponents, including the Korean Zen master Chinul. Though Huayan has long been recognized as fascinating and important, it has been neglected for many different reasons, its complexity being one of them. In chapter 8 Park’s impressive alignment of commentators and analyses of the different positions taken by Huayan interpreters such as Fazang (643–712) and Chengguan (738–840) navigates around the problem of ethics presented by Huayan’s tendency to privilege noumenon and negate phenomenon in its fourfold worldview (pp. 161–177).

What is important for Park to establish in view of her enterprise is to point out that this tendency—sometimes read as totalistic in the way it subsumes the level of phenomenon to the noumenon—does not obviate conflict. She relies on Chengguan’s insight on this: “As Chengguan acknowledges, the phenomenal world, by nature, contains obstructions because of the sheer fact of its tangible reality, not to mention the more complex issue of the intentionality of the subjective agency” (p. 177). Having established that “Chengguan did not deny the existence of conflict on the phenomenal level” (p. 177), Park spells out her enterprise more clearly: “Our task, then, is to unravel how Huayan Buddhism draws its vision of the mutually non-interfering phenomena despite its awareness of the inevitably mutually obstructing nature of phenomena” (p. 177). Using the famous chapter on “Entering the Realm of Reality” (Ruâijie pin) in the Huayan jing, Park illustrates how the “one Truth” is ultimately open-ended or always deferred. In the story, where Sudhana seeks the truth from fifty-three teachers, it is shown that “each dharma teacher has perfected her/his own way in her/his own context, but it always falls short of being the one universally perfect truth” (p. 181), and thus, Park concludes, instead of negating phenomenal diversity, the story affirms it (pp. 178–182). Here again, Park is careful to return the reader to the issue of conflict: that none of the teachers claims that ultimate truth “could be an indirect acknowledgement that Sudhana’s journey implies potential conflict among phenomena” (p. 182).

Park’s concern to establish Buddhism’s acknowledgment of conflict is tied to the third theme of her book: ethics. If wisdom is required to comprehend the level of noumenon, compassion and wisdom are required for the apprehension of phenomena. And, as Park argues, the first is a preparation for the second (p. 185). But tension between the two remains, and the question—important for this book—is how to navigate or reconcile this tension without one subsuming the other. Park does not resolve this question but suggests that recognition of this tension is adequate as a starting point: “Ethics in this [Huayan ethical] paradigm does not arise by negating the diverse phenomena and emphasizing [an] all encompassing noumenon. Instead, ethics begins with the realization of the tension between the two” (p. 187).

Park sees common ground between the Huayan ethical paradigm and postmodern ethics. Borrowing heavily from Derrida’s essay “On Cosmopolitanism,” Park reiterates Derrida’s point that ethics is hospitality, because “ethics, like hospitality, begins
with one’s relationship with others” (p. 218). But tension invariably arises in this interrelationship with the other. “What is at stake in Derrida’s discussion of hospitality is the very aporia that the concept of hospitality carries with it” (p. 209). To open one’s space to guests, foreigners, and visitors is to be hospitable, and yet one cannot do so unconditionally. The tension in this concept lies in what Park calls the problem of “appropriation.” “No matter how much one opens one’s door to a commitment to hospitality, appropriation is inevitable in the actualization of hospitality” (p. 209).

Much as Sudhana’s search for enlightenment (the universal truth) will always be deferred and open-ended as he moves from one teacher to the next, local truths and ultimate truths will always tango in tension. “What makes our knowledge and value judgments a local truth instead of a universal one is the mutually enforced tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces” (p. 209). As Park tells us, to acknowledge “tension” as a form of ethics is an effort to prevent closure in reading texts and contexts. She writes at the end of her book, “this ethics of tension is our proposal to identify the new ethical paradigm that should emerge from the shared realm of Buddhist and postmodern philosophy” (p. 222).

Park’s book is rich in the breadth of its research and the depth of its analysis, and the “ethics of tension” she proposes challenges us to think along with her on how to make it applicable in a world fraught with tensions. Buddhism and Postmodernity is a must read for philosophers and Buddhist scholars.


Reviewed by Eduardo Mendieta Stony Brook University

There is a philosophical tradition that sustains it is impossible to philosophize without doing the history of philosophy. This tradition is as old as philosophy itself, if we begin with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, all of whom philosophized by referring to their predecessors. Aristotle began his major treatises with short but sharp précis of what had been thought about the specific subject. If we are to claim to be part of this tradition, then it becomes imperative that we think of what has defined the history of philosophy; that is, we have to think what forces, events, trends, preoccupations, and historical junctures have punctuated this history. In the shadow of this imperative, it is noteworthy that we have largely neglected the way in which philosophy has been determined by war. If philosophy is its history and history has been shaped by war, then philosophy is the history of war, or the history of the major wars that have shaped human society.

Indeed, there is a way in which we can write the history of philosophy as the story of the major wars of human history. For example, consider ancient Greek philosophy and the Peloponnesian War: Socrates was a hoplite in this war. Or early Christian philosophy and the Barbarian invasions: Augustine’s City of God is an apology for Christianity against the accusation that Christians were to blame for the