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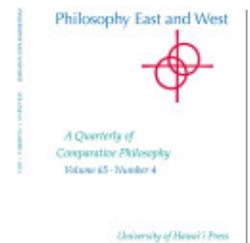
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## **The Ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response to an Illusory World by Warren Lee Todd (review)**

Anantanand Rambachan

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personality”), but in large chunks it can sink under its own heft—a side effect that in any event prevents the authors from slipping into Oprah territory (e.g., *Care of the Soul*, *Soul Matters*, *Chicken Soup for the Gestalt Soul*).

Goodman and Caramenico locate the soul not so much in the history of the “soul” or self *as itself* but through the contemplation of its five arguments, each of which they carefully establish against the disparagement of reductionism: perception, consciousness, memory, agency, and creativity. These are the complex aspects over which the soul serves as an emergent and unified central control. *Coming to Mind* is a substantial, sustained, valuable, even valiant effort to claim the soul as a worthy topic and not the *dybbuk* of the materialists, reductionists, and New Atheists. Drawing from their impressive range—from the science of eye movement to Arabic grammar—Goodman and Caramenico make a genuine case for setting a place for the soul at the table. *Mangia!*

*The Ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response to an Illusory World.* By Warren Lee Todd. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. Pp. xi + 220. ISBN 978-1-40-946681-9.



Reviewed by **Anantanand Rambachan**  
Saint Olaf College  
rambacha@stolaf.edu

Warren Lee Todd’s *The Ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva* is a study on comparative ethics focused on the exposition of Śaṅkara (Advaita Vedānta) and Śāntideva (Mādhyamaka). Todd acknowledges the profound metaphysical difference at the heart of both traditions. Śaṅkara affirms the reality of the *ātman* and its identity with the limitless *brahman*. Śāntideva, on the other hand, denies the reality of a permanent self and advocates the teaching of self-emptiness (*anātman*). These two positions, Todd concedes, cannot be reconciled, even when we understand Śaṅkara to require the dropping of a false self. “This is where the *anātman* doctrine has its force. It is indeed egoism (*ahaṃkāra*) that causes suffering (*duḥkha*), but the belief that one has a permanent centre, a true self (*ātman*), according to the Buddhist, increases the delusion, which itself causes egoism” (p. 78). At one point in his discussion (pp. 90–91), Todd notes the problem of translating *ātman* as “self,” especially in the context of Advaita Vedānta. This is a problem acknowledged by Śaṅkara himself in his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (I.iv.7), and specifically on the use of the expression *ātmetyevopāsīta* in this verse:

The use of the particle ‘*iti*’ along with the word ‘Self,’ to which you referred, only signifies that the truth of the Self is really beyond the scope of the term and the concept ‘Self.’ Otherwise the *śruti* would only say, ‘One should meditate upon the Self.’ But this would imply that the term and the concept ‘Self’ were permissible with regard to the Self. *That however is repugnant to śruti.*<sup>1</sup>

Śaṅkara continues by citing a series of apophatic Upaniṣad texts pointing to the limits of all words in relation to *ātman/brahman*. Todd does not pursue further the implications of this for the Advaita-Madhyamaka comparison. The nature of *ātman*, as understood in Advaita, would, after all, preclude the description that one has a true self since such discourse objectifies and renders *ātman* as a “thing” to be possessed.

Acknowledging the metaphysical *ātman/anātman* gulf that separates both traditions, Todd proceeds to identify deep similarities, challenging “the commonly held view that *ātman/anātman* is the major distinguishing feature of these two religions” (p. 44). His highlighting of elements of a shared worldview held by Śaṅkara and Śāntideva is detailed, rich, and insightful, and constitutes a significant achievement of this work. The list is a lengthy one. Both commentators emphasize the need for renunciation, representing the world as a place of suffering. Celibacy and asceticism are prescribed and women regarded as dangerous. Both value knowledge within their traditions, the word of the Buddha, and the Vedas, respectively, even though Todd describes this knowledge “as a form of realization that is beyond the beyond the intellect” (p. 137):

Both claim that realization removes ignorance (*avidyā*) and leads to an end of suffering (*duḥkha*). Both insist that renunciation is a necessary preliminary to insight, and that some form of inquiry into reality is necessary. Both then claim that this inquiry must eventually cease, and both surprisingly devalue the rewarding bliss (*ānanda*) that their traditions assert arises at this juncture. And finally, both will place their knowers-of-reality in the role of teacher, whose “job” it is to show others that there is in fact no individuated self. (p. 137)

Both would claim that the truth of non-individuation needed to be thoroughly grasped and subsequently spread to others. The life-style was that of the wise and caring teacher, the compassionate guru. The initial task was to deconstruct the self so as to become selfless. The further task was to then reconstruct the suffering other, so as to be capable of empathizing with their confused condition. (p. 199)

Todd’s critical identification of overlooked elements of a worldview shared by Śaṅkara and Śāntideva is an important contribution to comparative Hindu-Buddhist studies and to Hindu-Buddhist dialogue. He succeeds in making Śāntideva interesting and accessible to the community of Advaita scholars and practitioners and, one hopes, does the same for Śaṅkara and contemporary Buddhists. I make this claim, being myself a scholar-practitioner of Advaita and a reader of this work primarily through this lens. Good comparative work invites self-reflection and engenders new questions about the meaning of one’s tradition in the light of the other. The encounter with Śāntideva certainly affords such opportunities for the Advaitin.

Todd’s work suggests many issues for Advaita reflection, but one stands out prominently. Todd correctly notes (p. 185) that while, for Śaṅkara and the Advaita tradition, the knower of *brahman* is beyond caste identification, Śaṅkara supported and defended caste in the social sphere. This seemingly contradictory position becomes explicable in the light of the Two-Truths strategy shared by both Śaṅkara and Śāntideva. Although caste is non-existent from the perspective of ultimate truth, it is

valid in the social sphere from the standpoint of relative truth. The ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva are not egalitarian (p. 189). Todd makes an important observation about the Advaita tradition, which I read also as a challenge for self-examination:

It is misleading to think of Advaita as a non-dual philosophy, without being clear what they are being non-dual about. They are clearly not being non-dual about body versus Self. They are not being non-dual when it comes to the question of caste. They are not being non-dual with regard to gender. They are not being non-dual about other schools of thought. . . . Hence, from the empirical point of view, we see that Advaita admits of numerous distinctions. Non-duality then, for Advaita, is of a very specific kind, it is the non-duality of the *atman* and *brahman* which, in a nutshell, means the non-duality of self-reflexive consciousness. (p. 186)

In the case of Śāntideva, his nonduality excludes gender, and Todd notes the “abundance of sexism” in the *Compendium* (p. 189).

In his accounting for the absence of egalitarian ethics and impartiality in Śaṅkara and Śāntideva Todd focuses on the way both commentators employ the Two Truths hypothesis. Contemporary Advaitins and Buddhists, however, cannot similarly condone and legitimize inequality and injustice in the social sphere, with the accompanying oppression and violence, by recourse to the Two Truths. We need to consider more critically the relationship between ultimate truth claims and social reality and to ask probing questions about the implications of the former for the latter. Todd’s work could be a catalyst for Hindu-Buddhist dialogue on this important matter. India’s neo-Buddhist movement, after all, was founded by Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956) as a protest against the social injustices of caste, and the tensions with the Hindu tradition continue to this day. Caste was the issue that divided two of modern India’s greatest leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar. I doubt that neo-Buddhists will find the theory of Two Truths an acceptable explanation for centuries of marginalization.

At the heart of Todd’s comparative project is his effort to demonstrate that the radically opposite understandings of self in Śaṅkara and Śāntideva lead to “similar accounts of the relationship between conduct and world in a ‘selfless framework.’” He characterizes their approach as “constructive altruism.” In the discussion that follows, I limit my comments to evaluating Todd’s representation of the Advaita tradition and the grounds that he proffers for selfless action in the world.

To explain the possibility of action in the world on the part of the knower of *brahman*, Todd suggests the usefulness of what he labels “flickering consciousness.” This expression describes human beings who occupy the middle category between those who do not know *brahman* and those who “fully know reality” (p. 22). Persons in this category experience a flickering between seeing the world under the condition of ignorance (*avidyā*) and seeing the world under the truth of nonduality. In the case of Śāntideva, according to Todd, the flickering is imposed on the *bodhisattva* as a necessity for compassionately responding to suffering. In the case of Śaṅkara, on the other hand, flickering is not desirable but is the only way to explain the possibility for action in the world on the part of the *brahman*-knower (*brahmajñāni*).

Flickering consciousness, or temporary lapses, is therefore a most useful means of interpreting Śaṅkara's way of allowing for the behavior of the enlightened householder. In fact, as I will argue throughout this book, Śaṅkara's moves with regard to the actions of knowers will not do *unless* one accepts the notion of flickering. In other words, the issue is not whether or not the person is fully enlightened; the point is that the person can be enlightened at times, slightly deluded at times, and may flicker between these states (p. 24).

There is no doubt that Śaṅkara acknowledges the possibility of a certain unsteadiness in the knowledge of *brahman* arising from the strength of tendencies (*vāsanā*) cultivated over many lives. One of his clearest statements on this point may be found in his commentary on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.iv.7:

Since the resultant of past actions that led to the formation of the present body must produce definite results, speech, mind, and body are bound to work even after the highest realization, for actions that have begun to bear fruit are stronger than knowledge—as, for instance, an arrow that has been let fly continues its course for some time. Hence, the operation of knowledge, being weaker than they [is liable to be interrupted by them and] becomes only a possible alternative. Therefore, there is need to regulate the train of remembrance of the knowledge of the Self by having recourse to means such as renunciation and dispassion.

There are several similar passages in the commentaries of Śaṅkara, and Todd notes some of these. Śaṅkara's point in such remarks, however, as is clear from the final sentence in the passage above, is to stress the need for the practice of discipline as a means to attaining steadiness in knowledge. Sense and body control must be accompanied by a continuous trend of thought centered on the *atman*. "Flickering consciousness," if that is the appropriate term for what Śaṅkara describes here, is a condition to be overcome and is not proposed by Śaṅkara as an explanation for the possibility of action in the world on the part of the *brahmajñāni*.

If I am reading Todd accurately, and this issue could be clarified further, the argument for proposing a "flickering consciousness," a movement between *jñāna* and *ajñāna*, arises from the assumption that in the state of nondual knowledge, the world of diversity is not experienced, and action, therefore, is not possible. Todd equates nondual knowledge with the state of absorption (*samādhi*), citing the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (p. 77). A nondual teacher in this state of absorption is incapable of imparting instruction. Instruction requires that the teacher emerge from this condition.

For it is clear that, in teaching others, one must assume an additional preoccupation. Also if the "Vedas are no Vedas" in such a state of awakened consciousness (*Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* IV.i.3), then surely the teacher must come out of this state in order to teach from them. Hence, the only way the enlightened can help the unenlightened is by occasionally coming out of this state of absorption in order to share the student's distorted vision of reality (p. 130).

The equation of Śaṅkara's Advaita with a mind-transcending experience (*samādhi*) is controversial and relevant, for various reasons, to Todd's project. His citations of the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, a text that grants centrality to the *samādhi*

experience, are surprising in light of his acknowledgment (p. 2) that it may not be authored by Śaṅkara. Yet, he treats this work as “a gloss on Śaṅkara’s authentic works” (p. 2). The *Vivekacūdāmaṇi* has not been the focus of those Sanskrit commentators who have offered commentaries on other works of Śaṅkara. Michael Comans infers from this fact that it was either a later composition or not regarded as an authentic work of Śaṅkara.<sup>2</sup> Recent Advaita scholarship has critically considered the significance of *samādhi* in works of Śaṅkara and noted his sparing, and not always favorable, use of the term. He does not propose *samādhi* as the goal and culmination of the Advaita quest.<sup>3</sup>

Todd’s representation of Advaita as a condition of absorption from which one must emerge to be selflessly active in the world is problematic also for other reasons that go beyond the authenticity of sources. “Flickering consciousness,” that is, the movement between enlightenment and delusion is, for Todd, the condition allowing for ethical action in the world:

Thus we are surely justified in imagining the *brahman*-knower flickering between moments of ‘light’ and moments of ‘darkness,’ or periods of right cognition (*samyag-jñāna*) and wrong-cognition (*mithyā-jñāna*). It would seem that light and darkness *can* co-exist in the very same person, but not at the same time. Or we might say that one ‘person’ flickers between imagining himself to be an individuated self and being in a non-individuated state of *brahman*. In his *brahman*-moments, the imaginary individuated self disappears, and with it the desire for objects. (p. 129)

The sharp distinction in the *brahmajñāni* between a state of liberation in which dualism vanishes and one in which it exists seems difficult to justify in Śaṅkara. Todd concedes that “Śaṅkara does not provide us with a positive theory of how such flickering would work” (p. 172). Śaṅkara does not treat liberation as a state in which the world of objects vanishes and from which it appears again after the *brahmajñāni* emerges from absorption. There are many important passages in this context, but one will suffice. In his commentary on *Brahma Sūtra* III.ii.21, Śaṅkara is responding to the opponent’s view that the world of diversity must be negated as a condition for the knowledge of *brahman*. Śaṅkara treats nonduality as a distinctive knowledge about the nature of the world and not a condition in which diversity ceases to exist:

What is meant by this sublation of the universe of manifestations? Is the world to be annihilated like the destruction of the solidity of *ghee* by contact with fire; or is it that the world of name and form, created in *brahman* by nescience like many moons created in the moon by the eye-disease called *timira*, has to be destroyed through knowledge? Now if it be said that that the existing universe of manifestations, consisting of the body etc., on the corporeal plane and externally of the earth etc., is to be annihilated, that is a task impossible for any man, and hence the instruction about its extirpation is meaningless. Moreover [even supposing that such a thing is possible, then] the universe, including the earth etc., having been annihilated by the first man who got liberation, the present universe should have been devoid of the earth etc.<sup>4</sup>

The world of diversity, according to Śaṅkara, exists both for the *brahman*-knower and for the one who does not know *brahman*. The difference is that the former under-

stands the world to have *brahman* alone as its truth and ground, “the one without a second.”<sup>5</sup> Todd cites (p. 127) Śaṅkara’s comment on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV. iv.6: “Really there is no such distinction as liberation and bondage in the self, for it is eternally the same; but the ignorance regarding it is removed by the knowledge arising from the teachings of the scriptures, and prior to the receiving of these teachings, the effort to attain liberation is perfectly reasonable.” The meaning here is that bondage is an erroneous idea in the mind, and liberation is its removal with the teachings of the Upaniṣads, the valid means of knowledge in this context. The mind is the locus for the removal of *avidyā*, and Śaṅkara does not grant epistemic significance to any mind-transcending absorption.

Nondualism (Advaita), for Śaṅkara, is not a mind-transcending state of absorption; it is a truth about the nature of reality, with two fundamental insights that do not require dismissal of the world. First is the identity of the individual self (*ātman*) with the limitless *brahman*. This is the teaching enunciated in the great sentences (*mahāvākyas*) of the Upaniṣads: “That Thou Art” (*tat tvam asi*) is taken from *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.viii.7 of the *Sāma Veda*; “This *ātman* is *brahma*” (*ayam ātmā brahma*) is taken from *Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad* 2 of the *Atharva Veda*; “Awareness is *brahma*” (*prajñānam brahma*) is taken from *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 5.3 of the *Ṛg Veda*; and “I am *brahma*” (*ahaṁ brahmāsmi*) is taken from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.iv.10 of the *Yajur Veda*. The second claim, just as important and fundamental to Advaita, is that *brahman* constitutes the truth (*satya*) of the universe, even as clay is the truth of all objects made of clay. This is articulated in the famous text from *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* III.xiv.1, “*sarvam khalvidam brahma*” (All this indeed is the infinite).

If Advaita is not regarded as a state of absorption from which one must emerge in order to engage the world, but as a truth about the nature of the world that is not in opposition to the experience of diversity, how may we explain the selfless action of the *brahman*-knower? This is obviously a subject that exceeds the scope of this review, and a brief response will not do justice to the richness and complexity of Todd’s discussion. Two observations, therefore, must suffice. First, the seeker after *brahman*-knowledge must be committed to certain moral and ethical values and disciplines. In his commentary on *Brahma Sūtra* I.i.1, Śaṅkara identifies these with “discrimination between the eternal and non-eternal; dispassion for the enjoyment of the fruits (of work) here and hereafter; a perfection of such practices as control of the mind, control of the senses and organs, etc., and a hankering for liberation.” While this fourfold list is cited most often, Śaṅkara endorses a longer list of virtues that include humility, non-injury, and patience.<sup>6</sup> In his comments on *Bhagavad Gītā* 13:11, Śaṅkara commends these virtues as necessary for the gain of knowledge and notes also that “what is opposed to this—viz., pride, hypocrisy, cruelty, impatience, insincerity and the like—is ignorance which should be known and avoided as tending to the perpetuation of *saṁsāra*.” *Bhagavad Gītā* 12:13–19 offers another list of moral and ethical qualities, and Śaṅkara associates these specifically with the knower of *brahman*. Verse 13 speaks of *jñāni* as free from hate and as friendly and compassionate toward all. Śaṅkara’s commentary is revealing:

He hates nothing, not even that which causes him pain. He regards all beings as himself. He is friendly and compassionate. He is full of compassion for the distressed i.e., he has offered security of life to all beings, he is a *sannyāsī*.

The significant point here is that the seeker of *brahman* brings a deeply ethical orientation to the world that includes compassion. A compassionate or selfless mode of engagement in the world does not emerge unexpectedly in the *brahman*-knower. Second, Śaṅkara seems to suggest a spontaneous selflessness in the *jñāni* that is the expression of wisdom. The selfless response to the world that requires effort (*sādhana*) from the seeker (*sādhaka*) becomes spontaneous expression or ornaments (*alaukāra*) for the *jñāni*. He prefaces his commentary on *Bhagavad Gītā* 3 : 25 with the observation that the knower of *brahman* “should work for the welfare of others, though for himself he may have nothing to do.” For the person of wisdom, “there is nothing to do, except it be with a view to the welfare of the world, at large.” Śaṅkara’s suggestion here is that freedom from ignorance about the nature of the *atman* and freedom from *avidyā*-generated desires do not destroy the *jñāni*’s ability or motivation to act. The *jñāni* is liberated to act spontaneously and selflessly for world well-being and as an example to others. Todd is correct in noting that Śaṅkara emphasizes the teaching function of the *brahman*-knower and offers insightful reasons for this. Beyond Śaṅkara, there is no necessity for so limiting the world-welfare (*lokasaṃgraha*) activities of the *jñāni*, and a wider sphere of engagement would be entirely consistent with the meaning of *advaita* for Śaṅkara.

The value of Todd’s work in highlighting important similarities between Śaṅkara and Śāntideva has to be seen in light of contemporary (Sri Lanka, Nepal, India) and past tensions between the practitioners of both traditions and the emphasis on underlining discontinuities. The Buddha, in the Pāli Canon, denounces the authority of the Vedas as revelation and those who follow its teachings. Śaṅkara was a vigorous opponent of what he understood to be the teachings of the Buddha and represented these as incapable of leading to liberation and happiness. The Mīmāṃsā commentator Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa (ca. eighth-century C.E.) denounced the Buddha for teaching, without discrimination, people of all castes and not limiting his instruction to the upper castes. The primary concern, through the centuries, has not been mutual learning or the acknowledgment of mutual influence. Each tradition sought to demonstrate its own superiority and defeat the other in argument. Todd’s work opens a path to a more fruitful and enriching engagement. In the current academy, where Buddhist studies are pursued largely disconnected from the wider Indian *weltanschauung*, Todd’s study is a welcome exception, identifying and critically illuminating the shared ground that nourished the thought of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva.

#### Notes

- 1 – My italics. See Swami Madhavananda trans., *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), I.iv.7.
- 2 – See Michael Comans, “The Question of the Importance of *Samādhi* in Modern and Classical Advaita Vedānta,” *Philosophy East and West* 43, no. 1 (1993): 19–38.

- 3 – Ibid. I have also interrogated the significance of experience in my writings. See, in particular, Anantanand Rambachand, *Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Source of Valid Knowledge in Śāṅkara* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), and also *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).
- 4 – *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya of Śrī Śāṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977).
- 5 – See Śāṅkara's commentary on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.v.i.
- 6 – See Śāṅkara's commentary on *Bhagavad Gītā* 13 : 7–11 in Alladdi Mahadeva Sastry, trans., *The Bhagavadgītā: With the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya* (Madras: Samata Books, 1977).

*An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The Book of Curiosities*. Edited and translated by Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith. Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies 87. Pp. xii + 796. Leiden: Brill, 2014. \$289.00, ISBN 978-9-00-425564-7.

Reviewed by **Oliver Leaman** University of Kentucky oliverleaman@gmail.com

*An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The Book of Curiosities*, edited and translated by Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith, is an exceptionally beautiful book with a central focus on the *Book of Curiosities*, as it has come to be known, an eleventh century treatise on the heavens and the earth. It gives us a good idea of the state of science, loosely defined, in its time in Fatimid Egypt. As the editors point out, the book author's knowledge tends to start off being fairly solid around the Mediterranean coast and then becomes progressively more speculative with distance from that area. The manuscript has been reproduced as a color facsimile, which allows us to see almost at first hand not only the neat script but also the splendid maps, drawings, plans, and many other delightful designs. Included in the book are an Arabic copy of the text, an English translation, and very extensive notes; all in all this is an outstanding work of scholarship. People talk about the problems encountered by those working in the humanities, but this volume is an indication of the high level of accomplishment that can be achieved today. It is a most spectacular book, and I defy anyone to hold it in their hands and not be impressed by the product that lies before them. Hats off yet again to Brill for a magnificent product.

There is nothing in the book that is likely to be of direct relevance to the readers of this journal, apart from the topic itself. A list of strange and remarkable phenomena is very much an indication of a time when knowledge was limited, and gaps needed to be filled by guesswork and the observations made in the past by people who probably had little to go by in the way of evidence. (Jorge Luis Borges pokes fun at this sort of book in some of his short stories, where he produces incomprehensible lists and ways of grouping things together in what seems little more than a random collection.) Why produce such a miscellany of observations, many of which refer to remarks made by classical authors whose reliability seems to be zero? We get