



PROJECT MUSE®

Studies in Buddhist Philosophy by Mark Siderits (review)

Roy W. Perrett

Philosophy East and West, Volume 68, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 1-5 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2018.0032>

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 68 - Number 1

University of Hawai'i Press



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/682224>

BOOK REVIEW

Studies in Buddhist Philosophy. By Mark Siderits. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. viii + 313. Hardcover \$75.00, ISBN 978-0-19-875486-2.



Reviewed by **Roy W. Perrett**
Ashoka University
roy.perrett@ashoka.edu.in

Over the last few decades Mark Siderits has established himself as a leading philosophical interpreter of Indian Buddhist philosophy. He has published widely in this field, but three of his books are particularly well known: his *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* (2003), a self-styled “essay in fusion philosophy”; his introductory textbook *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2007); and—with Shōryū Katsura—his translation and commentary, *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (2013). Taken together, these three books offer a fuller sense of Siderits’ philosophical concerns with Buddhism. The concern with “fusion philosophy” is focused primarily on philosophical problem-solving and energetically quarries Buddhist philosophy for possible solutions to these universal problems. But Siderits is equally concerned with getting right the details of the classical Indian texts and making them accessible to non-Sanskritist philosophers through his translations, for successful fusion philosophy needs to be sensitive to the details of what was going on in the Indian philosophical tradition.

The nineteen essays collected in *Studies in Buddhist Philosophy* are more directly concerned with Siderits’ second kind of concern than his first, insofar as they are usually focused on interpretive matters. But these interpretive endeavors are always motivated by larger systematic issues about how best to make progress on solving cross-cultural philosophical problems in epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. That the primary focus of most of the essays is interpretive, however, ensures that this book is not one for beginners in Indian Buddhist philosophy (Siderits’ own *Buddhism as Philosophy* is much better suited for that purpose). On the other hand, for those with some prior knowledge of the field this book offers an engaging and consistently thought-provoking set of essays.

Of course, all of the essays here have been previously published. But Siderits has also provided new postscripts to connect the pieces together by showing thematic interrelations, and has frequently indicated—with admirable intellectual honesty—where he presently holds different views from those he originally expressed. Hence there is not only the usual convenience value of having all the old essays now available in one volume, there is also the opportunity to grasp better the architectonic of Siderits’ distinctive take on

Indian Buddhist philosophy. Finally, Jan Westerhoff's excellent editorial introduction to the volume very successfully sets the stage for all of this.

The nineteen essays are divided into six groups. Part 1 of the book contains four essays on "Madhyamaka and Anti-Realism", a theme that Siderits has devoted much attention to over the years. There he expounds his semantic interpretation of emptiness, according to which Madhyamaka is best understood as a form of anti-realism. On Siderits' view, Mādhyamikas like Nāgārjuna do not intend to deny the effability of ultimate reality, but rather the intelligibility of the notion of a mind-independent nature of the world. This means that Madhyamaka is a kind of conventionalism, but one uncommitted to relativism—a point that (in essay 1.2) Siderits argues was very well understood by Bhāviveka and the often devalued Svātantrika tradition. Moreover, this semantic interpretation of emptiness (signaled by Siderits' slogan "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth") has soteriological implications: emptiness properly understood is supposed to free us from that most subtle form of grasping, our attachment to the idea of a final theory of the world. In contrast to the broadly empiricist strand in early Buddhism that is committed to a correspondence theory of truth, Madhyamaka instead draws inspiration from the spirit of the early Buddhist "category error" approach to the indeterminate (*avyākata*) questions.

Part 2 consists of five essays on "Logical and Metaphysical Problems". The first of these extends the discussion beyond Madhyamaka to address the Yogācāra-Sautrāntika school's tenet that the object of perception is a bare particular and hence all perception is non-conceptual. Replying to the objection that this would mean that (incoherently) there is nothing that it is like to perceive an object, Siderits argues that the Buddhists' commitment to externalism about mental content allows them to evade this charge.

Essay 2.2 discusses the Pudgalavādins, an early school of Buddhist thinkers who asserted the existence of a "person" (*pudgala*), who is neither reducible to the psycho-physical aggregates, nor entirely distinct from them. One modern interpretation of this notorious claim is that it might be effectively equivalent to the claim that such a person might supervene on the aggregates, but not be reducible to them. Siderits, however, rejects this as failing to provide the Pudgalavādins with the "middle way" they sought for between Abhidharma reductionism and non-Buddhist self-theory—though in a postscript he indicates he thinks that it would be more charitable to interpret the Pudgalavādins as espousing an emergentism about persons.

Essay 2.3 is on causation and emptiness in early Madhyamaka, arguing that Nāgārjuna is right to suppose that nothing that arises in dependence on causes and conditions can possess intrinsic nature and thus be ultimately real. In a postscript, however, Siderits acknowledges that the viability of a "Humean" account of causation might allow for the possibility of causal relations between ultimately real entities.

Essay 2.4 addresses the case advanced by Jay Garfield and Graham Priest for a dialetheist interpretation of Nāgārjuna, i.e. one that takes him to be committed to the existence of true contradictions. Siderits' view is that such an interpretation is both historically problematic and philosophically undesirable, insofar as it threatens to undermine Mādhyamikas' extensive use of *prasaṅga* or *reductio* arguments.

Essay 2.5 is also about the role of logic in Buddhist philosophy, but this time about the nature of inference (*anumāna*) and the old worry about whether the Indian "syllogism" is deductive or inductive. Siderits argues for there being two different perspectives on a standard Indian inference: one concerns what the facts might be, and the other concerns the cognizer's epistemic position. Appreciating this distinction will enable us to understand better what is going on in an Indian inferential situation.

Part 3 focuses on philosophy of language, particularly the Buddhist nominalists' doctrine of "exclusion" (*apoha*): roughly, the idea that the meaning of a kind term like "cow" is the exclusion of its exclusion class "non-cow". A standard Indian objection to this theory is that it is circular, since we can only understand the meaning of "non-cow" if we already understand the meaning of "cow". In reply Siderits appeals to the distinction between choice and term negation and in two essays explores in some detail how a combination of these two types of negation might allow the construction of ersatz universals from a base of pure particulars.

Essay 3.3 explores a related, but different issue: the apparent absence of a sense-reference distinction in Indian philosophy of language. Siderits presents two counterexamples to this general claim: the way in which the Buddhist philosopher *Dharmakīrti* effectively distinguishes between the sense and reference of a predicative expression in his development of *apoha* theory, and the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā theory of related designation, which holds that what is designated by a word in a sentence is already related.

Part 4 of the book is concerned with epistemology. The first two essays in this section are on the Madhyamaka critique of epistemology, with 4.1 and 4.2 focusing, respectively, on Nāgārjuna's critique of *pramāṇavāda* epistemology in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and Candrakīrti's extension of this in the *Prasannapadā*. Essay 4.3 argues that classical Indian epistemology is *externalist* and denies the internalist thesis that to have knowledge one must know that one knows. Siderits believes that this suggestion coheres well with Nāgārjuna's critique of epistemological foundationalism.

Part 5 is devoted to ethics. Essay 5.1 is on the problem of free will and moral responsibility and argues for a position Siderits calls "Buddhist paleocompatibilism". The leading idea here is that, given the Buddhist doctrine of two truths, the form of determinism said to be incompatible with moral responsibility could only be true ultimately, whereas the claim that persons are

morally responsible can only be true conventionally. Hence nothing about responsibility can follow from the thesis of determinism.

Essay 5.2 considers whether the structure of Buddhist ethics is better described as consequentialist or virtue theoretic. Siderits' suggestion is that it is best described as a form of "aretaic consequentialism", where the cultivation of the virtues is to be justified on consequentialist grounds as promoting the Buddhist end of reducing suffering and, ultimately, the attainment of liberation.

Finally, Part 6 consists of two essays that discuss the relations between Buddhist and non-Buddhist Indian philosophy. Essay 6.1 is concerned with the debate between the Nyāya realists and the Buddhist anti-realists, arguing once more that Indian epistemologies should be seen as externalist, rather than internalist. A consequence of this common feature is then claimed to be that (notwithstanding their other differences) both Naiyāyikas and Buddhists believe we can justifiably hold our beliefs without knowing that the justification obtains. Accordingly, the Madhyamaka thesis that the *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* are mutually interdependent cannot provide a master argument for emptiness.

Essay 6.2 addresses the difference between Madhyamaka and Advaita Vedānta, two systems sometimes seen as closely aligned. Siderits argues, however, that while Advaita is a realist view with a theory of what is ultimately true, Madhyamika is an anti-realism that rejects any final theory of what is foundationally true.

As I have already indicated, this is an admirable book: lucidly written, carefully argued, and philosophically inventive. Moreover, although philosophers in both India and the West are notoriously contrary creatures, I personally find much of it to be very persuasive. Predictably enough, however, I do not find all of Siderits' claims equally compelling. For instance, while I agree that Indian epistemology can—very broadly speaking—be represented as externalist about justification, I think it also exhibits significant internalist features (particularly in later Nyāya). I also find Siderits' explication (in Chs. 1.3 and 5.2) of the key Buddhist notion of suffering (*duḥkha*) to be implausibly intellectualistic.

A different sort of reservation I have, though, is about what is left out of Indian Buddhist philosophy in Siderits' account of it. Of course, any book on Indian Buddhist philosophy is going to have to be selective and there is nothing that an author has to apologize for in that. But it is also important to try to reconstruct the author's principles of selection. There is no discussion in Siderits' writings, for example, of the extensive Buddhist debates about the nature of path (*marga*) and its attendant philosophical psychology that we find in both Abhidharma and in the *bodhisattva* manuals by Candrakīrti and Śāntideva, notwithstanding that he refers frequently to those texts. Nor is there any attention paid to the metaphysical speculations about Buddhahood and its attributes to be found in Dharmakīrti and other Yogācāra authors. Nor is there even much philosophical concern shown for the problematic notions of karma

and rebirth. Indeed, readers from a traditional Buddhist background coming to Siderits' work are likely to experience his vision of Indian Buddhist philosophy as a somewhat religiously desiccated one. This is not to suggest that Siderits simply ignores Buddhist soteriological concerns: on the contrary, he is frequently quite explicit about them. But usually only when they can be safely subsumed under the rubric of "Buddhist ethics", which he views as a variety of ethical naturalism.

Siderits brings to his fusion philosophy project his dual training in classical Indian philosophy and Western "analytic" philosophy. In recent years analytic philosophy (particularly in America) has often taken a naturalistic turn, insisting on philosophy's continuity with the methods of science and exhibiting a corresponding bias towards physicalism. In contrast, there is also much recent analytic work—on the metaphysics of identity, change and material being, and on normative non-naturalism, for instance—that is uncommitted to naturalism. But it is an (undefended) general commitment to philosophical naturalism that apparently determines Siderits' vision of what is to be included in Indian Buddhist philosophy proper.

This is clearly a disputable stand and any fusion philosopher of Siderits' naturalistic persuasion who also wants to get the historical Indian texts right eventually has to address the following two questions. First, the exegetical question: just how naturalistic was Indian Buddhist philosophy? Second, the philosophical question: is naturalism philosophically adequate to addressing the issues central to Buddhist philosophy? With respect to the exegetical question, I take it to be relatively uncontroversial that there were both naturalistic and non-naturalistic strands of thought present in Indian Buddhist philosophy. But the full details of the relative weight of these surely remains open to debate. With respect to the philosophical question, those less impressed with the naturalistic turn in analytic philosophy will presumably be more sceptical about an affirmative answer than is Siderits. Whatever stand one takes on these crucial issues, however, Siderits' fine work remains an important resource for anyone interested in engaging philosophically with Indian Buddhist philosophy.