

*Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness: Tradition and Dialogue*, edited by Mark Siderits, Ching Keng and John Spackman. Brill, 2021. 356pp., €135/\$162. Hb ISBN-13: 9789004440890; e-PDF ISBN-13: 9789004440913.

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If the function of scholarly book reviews is to introduce and evaluate a given work to interested parties, then reviewers of edited volumes face an especially onerous task. In the present case, I have reneged on the ideal of evaluating the eleven essays comprising the body of *Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness: Tradition and Dialogue* individually, and contented myself instead with briefly describing these so as to leave as much space as possible for an appraisal of the book as a whole. The review that follows, therefore, initially provides a summary of the contents before turning to a more general assessment.

The bulk of the book is divided into three parts, each of which is prefaced by a further editorial introduction outlining the essays therein and situating them in broader philosophical contexts. Each chapter, moreover, is prefaced by an abstract and list of keywords, and followed by its own list of references, thus rendering the structure of the book equivalent to three collections of articles such as may be found in special issues of dedicated journals.

The book opens with an editorial Introduction (1–23) that begins by setting out the book’s overall scope and mandate, and positions itself as primarily “meant to help smooth the way” (2) for non-specialist readers (on which point, see below). The first titled section then charts a diachronic historical account starting from “Early Buddhist Roots of Buddhist Views of Consciousness” (2–4) as per the Buddha’s own teachings. This is followed by two sections principally devoted to Abhidharma: “The Development of a Buddhist Philosophy of Mind” (4–8) and “Some Abhidharma Controversies Involving Consciousness” (8–10), the latter specifically discussing controversies regarding the simple or aggregate nature of consciousness, the reflexive or irreflexive nature of meta-cognition, and the relation between (non-conceptual) perception and (conceptual) thought. Then follows a section on “The Yogācāra School and Dignāga” (10–16), which briefly assesses the signature Yogācāra concept of “storehouse consciousness” (*ālayavijñāna*), introduces Dignāga’s attempt to reconcile Yogācāra idealism with Sautrāntika representationalist realism, and also includes discussion of Dharmakīrti *vis-à-vis* Naiyāyika and Mādhyamika interlocutors. This is followed by a return to the topic of “Buddhist Accounts of Meta-cognition” (16–19), this time as per Dignāga and

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Dharmakīrti, before a final section investigates “East Asian Buddhist Discussions of Consciousness” (19–22), primarily as per the elaborations of Dignāga’s ideas by Xuanzang and Kuiji.

Part 1, “Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism”, comprises chapters 1-3 and focusses on “The question of whether certain kinds of mental states are non-conceptual, independent of conceptualization” (26). Chapter 1 is “Knowing Blue: Ābhidharmika Accounts of the Immediacy of Sense Perception” by Robert H. Sharf (31–61). This is an abridgment of Sharf’s prior article in *Philosophy East and West* (Vol. 63(3), July 2018: 826–870; cf. the author’s acknowledgments on 32 n.1 and 56), and discusses “the place of immediate or nonconceptual or unconstructured cognition (*nirvikalpapajñāna*, *wu fenbie zhi* 無分別智) in... Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, and early Yogācāra writings” (31). Chapter 2 is “Nonconceptual Cognition in Yogācāra and Madhyamaka Thought” by John Spackman (62–88). This centres on the fact that “the claim that meditative states are nonconceptual plays a central role, both epistemologically and soteriologically, in much Buddhist thought” (62), and introduces a distinction between “supervenience” and “occurrent” nonconceptuality in aid of an argument to the effect that “if there are such things as pure consciousness experiences, they would be nonconceptual in both senses” (62). Chapter 3 is “Turning Earth to Gold: The Early Yogācāra Understanding of Experience Following Non-conceptual Cognition” by Roy Tzohar (89–112). This seeks to “unpack the phenomenological and conceptual aspects of the School’s conception of the “cognition obtained subsequent to IT” (*taṭpr̥ṣṭhalabdhanirvikalpapajñāna*)” (89), with the “IT” referring to “non-conceptual cognition” (*nirvikalpapajñāna*).

Part 2 is titled “Meta-cognition” and comprises chapters 4–8. Chapter 4 is “Whose Consciousness? Reflexivity and the Problem of Self-Knowledge” by Christian Coseru (121–153). This studies the question of whether “cognitive events [are] implicitly self-aware or is “self-awareness” just another term for the cognition that takes an immediately preceding instance of cognition for its object... [and] proposes a novel solution to this classical debate by reframing the problem of self-knowledge in terms of the relation between phenomenal concepts and phenomenal knowledge” (121). Chapter 5 is “Should Mādhyamikas Refute Subjectivity? Thoughts on What Might Be at Stake in Debates on Self-Awareness” by Dan Arnold (154–188). This “philosophically engage[s] the question of why or whether Mādhyamika philosophers are right to refuse *svasaṃvitti*, which arguably amounts to refuting *consciousness*” (154), with especial attention to Candrakīrti and Śāntarakṣita. Chapter 6 is “Self-Knowledge and Non-Self” by Mark Siderits (189–208). This takes its cue from “the transparency thesis – the thesis that the mind has transparent access to its own states,” and investigates “whether the [converse] opacity thesis has consequences that are incompatible with core Buddhist commitments” (189) such as “karma-rebirth ideology” (207). Chapter 7 is “The Genesis of \**Svasaṃvitti-saṃvitti* Reconsidered” by Toru Funayama (209–224). This argues that the fourfold division of cognition characteristic of East Asian Yogācāra and “attributed to the Indian commentator Dharmapāla as a refinement of Dignāga’s threefold division analysis is actually a Chinese innovation” (116). Chapter 8 is “Dharmapāla on the Cognition

of Other Minds (*paracittajñāna*)” by Shinya Moriyama (225–241). This argues that Dharmapāla’s “analyses of a bodhisattva’s and of a buddha’s cognitions of other minds... differs from Dharmakīrti’s and Ratnakīrti’s arguments on the same topic... [and] read[s] Dharmapāla’s argument as a variant of the so-called transparency thesis” (225).

Part 3 is titled, somewhat mysteriously at first sight, “Mental Consciousness in East Asian Buddhism: MSF”. What is MSF? Well, as the editors explain in the Introduction, the discussion here centres upon “the notion of mental consciousness (i.e., consciousness produced by the functioning of the inner sense faculty, *manas*) simultaneous with the five sensory consciousnesses (henceforth abbreviated as MSF for Mental consciousness Simultaneous with Five)” (20, cf. 244). I think that the inclusion of an otherwise incomprehensible acronym based on a neologistic phrase—itsself based on a point of contention known only to experts—is not the wisest of moves in a title (especially if the aim is to welcome non-specialists). I also have a quibble with the titular reference to “*East Asian Buddhism*” given that the texts and thinkers actually discussed are exclusively *Chinese*. In any case, this part comprises chapters 9–11.

Chapter 9 is “*Mānasa-pratyakṣa* as the Perception of Conventionally Real (*prajñaptisat*) Properties – Interpreting Dignāga’s *mānasa-pratyakṣa* Based on Clues from Kuiji” by Ching Keng (247–274). In terms of a summary, the title says it all. Chapter 10 is “Mental Consciousness and Its Objects” by Zhihua Yao (275–304). This “examines the following question: whether the Yogācāras would be in agreement with the Sarvāstivādins or the Sautrāntikas in their debate on the issue of what constitutes the cognitive objects of mental consciousness” (275). Finally, Chapter 11 is “Vasubandhu’s Theory of Memory: A Reading based on the Chinese Commentaries” by Chen-kuo Lin (305–326). This focuses on commentaries by Puguang and Kuiji which, it is proposed, “set the ground for the later development of the theory of memory in East Asian Buddhism” (306).

Turning now to an assessment of the book, there is no doubt that *Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness: Tradition and Dialogue* is a valuable contribution to the scholarly fields it straddles—or rather, eleven valuable contributions. The essays are written by acknowledged experts, and constitute no mere overviews of the material as per current scholarly consensus (where there is one) but rather endeavours to advance the frontiers of both our knowledge on relevant topics and texts, authors and arguments, and the conceptual sophistication of scholarly discussions thereof. In this sense, then, the editors’ stated claim to the effect that “The essays in this collection represent the current state of play in the scholarly examination of Buddhist philosophy of consciousness” (22) turns out to be fully justified. Indeed, the book contains much original and valuable research on conceptually complex philosophical notions as conveyed in the difficult classical languages of Sanskrit and Chinese (occasionally also Pāli and Tibetan). The contributions are philologically astute and philosophically informed as well as informative, and the overall endeavour to bring Buddhist sources into conversation with contemporary developments in analogous fields of Western philosophy is timely and important.

That said, it would be remiss of me not to note certain areas wherein the book could have been thought through differently and, to my mind at least, potentially improved thereby. The first point to note in this regard is doubtless the least fair one: the title *Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness* conveys a sense of definitiveness unwarranted by the actual scope of the material covered. In addition to those found here, countless other pertinent voices speaking in several other ancient and modern languages, belonging to numerous interlocking schools of thought, and deliberating abundant further topics are not so much as broached within the covers of this book. A limitation of scope is inevitable in any volume, of course, but perhaps a less comprehensive-sounding title would have given readers a better grasp of the range of readings on offer here, predominantly focussed as these are on Yogācāra.

A more substantive point is that, as should be apparent from the essay titles and summaries I have provided above, this is not a book for the faint-minded. On the contrary, we are dealing here with a compilation of specialized studies by and for experts. References to precedent specialist scholarship within the study of Buddhism far outnumber those to more general philosophical investigations of consciousness, and transliterated technical terms as well as footnotes are legion and copious, the latter often providing the cited source texts in the original languages. This is all excellent for the advanced scholars who will doubtless comprise the bulk of the readership, but unfortunately it will render the book difficult to access for others. Those potentially interested in the topics under discussion but effectively more or less barred from entry by the formidable philological and philosophical scholarship on display here I see as falling within three groups: practitioners, students, and philosophers. By practitioners I mean anyone interested in Buddhism, and more specifically Buddhist philosophy, and still more specifically Buddhist philosophy of consciousness, but unendowed with a doctorate in the field. By students I refer on the one hand to both undergraduate and, depending on their field of specialization, even many graduate students of Buddhism, and on the other to students of any other subject. As for philosophers, I refer above all to those “researchers in areas like cognitive science and the philosophy of mind who are interested in finding out more about Buddhist approaches to consciousness” (1) whom the editors identify as sought-after readers in stating “this volume attempts to address that interest” (1).

There are, of course, perfectly sound scholarly justifications for highly specialized books, edited or otherwise, so this is not necessarily a criticism. But there are also distinct drawbacks to what the editors do not shy away from calling the “narrow and difficult to penetrate” (2) nature of the essays collected here, or at least those among them “more concerned with matters Buddhological than with general questions concerning consciousness” (2). As such, it is not at all surprising to find that the very first pages of the Introduction, and thus of the book as a whole, seek “to provide a framework that should help non-specialists better understand the particular theories and debates discussed in these essays, by locating those discussions in the larger project of understanding consciousness” (1). Although the overview that follows is admirably precise and nuanced, and although the editors rightly avow that sometimes “effort invested may be amply rewarded” (2), however, the

very overt need for such an *apologia* at the outset should be evidence enough of the narrowly specialist nature of the material. Of course, even if some ‘lay’ readers might prove willing to invest the requisite effort, the fact that Brill is asking them to invest no less than €135/\$162 for the privilege of owning it will ensure that the book will make it onto the shelves of very few individuals indeed. (I for one can aver to potential buyers that the book is printed on paper (not vellum), is not without copy-editing errors (including of diacritics), and doesn’t do your dishes).

As for the structuring of the book into “three clusters, each representing a particular focus” (22), this unfortunately perpetuates an outstanding issue with the study of Buddhist philosophy at large. There are at least three problems, the most immediately apparent of which is the indecision between a topical and a geographical approach. For whereas the first two sections are devoted to specific topics (“Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism” on the one hand, “Meta-cognition” on the other), the final one titularly investigates a topic (MSF) from the distinct geographical angle of “East Asian Buddhism.” This is only exacerbated by a second problem, which is that multiple essays in parts 1 and 2 (specifically those by Sharf, Funayama, and Moriyama) in fact draw heavily on Chinese-language source texts, thus muddying the geographic compartmentalization anyway. But the most regrettable and significant consequence of this approach is that the editors have missed a valuable opportunity to normalize East Asian Buddhist philosophy as another and equally valid strand of Buddhist philosophy. For as readers familiar with the field will know, though the study of Buddhist philosophy in English and other European languages has grown substantially in size and sophistication over recent decades, the vast majority of relevant publications have concerned the Indian and Tibetan schools. While it is highly laudable that this book, unlike so many in Buddhist philosophy, includes East Asian contributions to the topics under study, the fact that these remain titularly demarcated off in their own section unfortunately cannot but further the unwarranted impression (especially among non-specialists) that East Asian Buddhist philosophers pursued lines of inquiry somehow apart from their South Asian intellectual brethren, who thus remain marked (insofar as *unmarked*) as the definitive Buddhist philosophers.

Speaking of “brethren”, the final point I wish to make in reviewing this book concerns the fact that all of the eleven contributors and three editors, without a single exception, are male. One can understand and accept that all of the Buddhist thinkers studied here would be male (as indeed they are), for the ancient societies in which they lived and wrote were highly patriarchal, but surely we have made some strides since then. Did no one at any point in this project perceive a problem here? I am not suggesting that the editors should have included a “token” female merely to make up numbers—though there are certainly many who are amply qualified to make valuable contributions, and whose inclusion could have mitigated some of the problems of consistency acknowledged in the Introduction. What I am stridently criticizing is the fact that in 2021 the profession still works in such a way that gender disparity—to the point of a complete exclusion of women—could pass for acceptable.