

The Ethics of Śāṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response to an Illusory World, by Warren Lee Todd, Ashgate Publishing, 2013. xii + 220pp., Hb. £60.00. ISBN-13: 9781409466819.

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Warren Todd sums up his book by posing the question ‘how could one practice ethics amongst persons regarded as ignorant illusions?’ (p.199). His book is distinguished by the range of mutually supporting ways in which he provides an exploration of ethics via an in-depth, clearly explained, metaphysically oriented study. Welcomed by the Dalai Lama and with a foreword by him, this is an outstanding and original book in its approach to ethics. Among its few failings is to throw the reader straight into the body of the text; an introduction would have been helpful.

Todd’s book is animated by reference to the compassionate, ethically driven activity of ‘enlightened beings’ who common folk can emulate by adopting ‘a selfless response to an illusory world’, and who therefore develop corresponding ethics as a basis for realising spiritual teachings that can lead to their own enlightenment. Todd therefore has to choose which tradition or traditions to draw on to illustrate enlightened ethics and teachings. He is guided partly by Barbra Clayton pointing out that it is by *comparison* ‘we come to know, integrate and articulate knowledge of anything’ (p.26) and additionally by drawing on his own experience as a Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioner. Accordingly, Todd chooses to draw ethical principles from two apparently metaphysically opposed traditions, i.e. Vedānta Hinduism with its metaphysics of Self (*ātman*) and Mahāyāna Buddhism with its metaphysics of non-self (*anātman*). He then chooses a main exemplar of ethics from each of these traditions, i.e. Śāṅkara and Śāntideva, not least because these masters have not been the subject of a previous comparative ethical study. Indeed, because this is a pairing of contemporaries active in ‘the same Indian philosophical milieu’, it therefore simplifies his aim of drawing comparisons between their respective ethics and approach to becoming enlightened.

In Chapter 1, Todd explains how Śāṅkara’s Self and Śāntideva’s non-self firstly have to be considered in relation to conventional and ultimate truth and secondly are both consistent with the paradoxical conventional reality of an individuated self.

In Chapter 2 Todd elucidates, separately for each master, the ethical and soteriological consequences of a self whose individuation is actually illusory, and remarkably finds these to be similar. He contrasts these similarities with their

differences to Western notions of altruism that generally demand an individuated self that has a relative but no ultimate existence. He explains that ethical behaviour involves, according to both Śaṅkara and Śāntideva, deluding oneself by deliberately constructing separate independent entities, and Todd therefore invents the term ‘constructive altruism’ to both encompass this activity and to be the title for his model of ethics. He also finds commonality in the process by which both Upaniṣadic *brahman*-knowers and Mahāyāna bodhisattvas exercise compassionate activity, and a novel way of expressing this, i.e. ‘flickering’ between ultimate and relative perspectives.

Chapter 3 provides an introduction to the worldview of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva which includes their often cross-cutting concepts and mutually commandeered methodologies, and this serves as a foundation for the remaining chapters of Todd’s book.

A central premise of Chapter 4 is that Śaṅkara and Śāntideva, while radically opposed in terms of ontology of Self, nevertheless have spiritual and ethical goals that are ‘so similar that they are able to take on a common opponent’ (p.81), i.e. the Yogācāra. Thus chapter 4 marks a temporary change of tack to reinforce an understanding of ethics as necessarily involving a pretence that the illusory world is real but now reaching this conclusion from the different perspective of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva joining forces against the Yogācāra. Todd takes the reader through seeming contradictions to his argument by a thorough explanation of the Dalai Lama’s point in his foreword that Śaṅkara’s philosophical views have many similarities with those of the Yogācāra. However, Todd ultimately supports his premise, with an unbiased and multi-perspective style of argument that runs throughout his book, by concluding that it is not through philosophical but rather ethical views that the two masters can be seen to line up against the Yogācāra.

Chapter 5 includes Todd’s elucidation of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva’s notions of knowledge and wisdom that differ radically from modern Western understanding, notably because they rely on realisations and an ultimate as well as relative recognition of reality. An original aspect of the account in this chapter is that Todd incorporates his new theories of ‘flickering’ and ‘constructive altruism’ to add considerable explanatory power.

Chapter 6 brings the preceding chapters to a conclusion. It begins with an exploration of a question posed in respect of *liberated* persons i.e. why should they respond to illusory people in an illusory world? His explanation centres on arguing that such beings, whilst still unenlightened, reached liberation by embedding their ethics in a search for selflessness which necessitated treating illusory beings as *if* they were individuated. He further argues that these ingrained ethics and the response to ‘illusory’ beings remains post-liberation. Todd develops simple but powerful explanatory models that identify and integrate the respective main domains of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva’s ethics and teachings, and thereby facilitates comparative understanding. He explains how the concept of rebirth in both Hinduism and Buddhism leads naturally to concern for our future lives (via our ‘continuum’) and explains how this can be the basis of a rationale leading us to care for others. And using a triangulated approach to theory that is a feature of his book i.e. different theoretical approaches leading to similar conclusions, Todd uses his novel notion of ‘flickering’ to provide an alternative explanation,

via relative and ultimate truth, of the way in which liberated beings relate to the illusory other.

Chapter 7 can be considered as an 'Afterword' where Todd reflects on how his prior articulation of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva's perspectives impact on women and 'lower castes'. This is compelling in its direct analysis that includes, for example, his argument that there is no contradiction between there never having been a female or outcaste Śaṅkarācārya (head of a Hindu Advaita monastery) with the fact that a *brahman*-knower does not discriminate by gender or caste.

Todd's book is notable for drawing on the wisdom of eighth century masters to provide a contemporary, engaging and original account of Indian metaphysics and ethics. From another perspective, the potential of Todd's book is indicated in the foreword by the Dalai Lama. It is to attempt to capture the age-old flavour of Indian intellectual openness and vibrant doctrinal debate, where seemingly contradictory schools of thought positively interact progressively to refine their respective points of view. As to how Todd realises this potential, in my view the work accords with the Dalai Lama's assessment that Todd follows 'the pattern of critical examination in which both masters [Śaṅkara and Śāntideva] participated' (p.vii).