

Paul J. GRIFFITHS, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court 1986. xxii + 220 pp., with a glossary, appendixes, and bibliographies. Available in both cloth and paperback.

This work focuses on a conundrum of Buddhist scholasticism, and exhibits in an extremely lucid and thorough discussion the precise nature of the logical and philosophical issues at stake. The conundrum itself is of minor interest. In the meditative state known as attainment of cessation all mental events come to a halt, yet the mind reactivates and emerges from this state; what is the cause of this reactivation? Theravāda sources teach that the cause is the practitioner's act of intention immediately preceding entry into that state, but this implies causality at a temporal distance and clashes with the basic principle of the momentariness of dharmas. The Sautrāntika position is that the immediately antecedent condition for mental reactivation is the continuing physical continuum, the body, with its senses and its "seeds" of future mental events. The Vaibhāṣikas, forced to bring into play their celebrated thesis that "everything exists," locate the cause in the last moment of consciousness to occur before entrance into cessation, a past event which can somehow still be operative. The Yogācāra thinkers invoke the possibility of emergence from cessation as an argument for positioning a store-consciousness, which persists even in this state, when all ordinary conscious events have disappeared. Griffiths shows that none of these positions is without its problems in terms of the fundamental Buddhist theses on causality, impermanence, and the absence of a substantial self. His demonstration of this quandary is completely convincing, and its deeper critical implications are persuasively hinted at on the last page of the main body of the text: "it is indicative of a significant intellectual weakness within the tradition that the tradition itself perceived the necessity for construction of a (mental) category which is very much like a substance: the store-consciousness. Causally connected continua of events seem to have been found by the Buddhist intellectual tradition in India, inadequate to perform the explanatory tasks required of them. It is more difficult than it seems to dispose of mental substances" (p. 113). Of course, Mādhyamika may have the answer to this.

All historians of ideas will learn from Griffiths' work how an argumentative engagement with the past thinkers, far from muddying the stream of a clear pedagogic exposition, can light up the contours of past debates more vividly and make one feel one is entering an ancient world from within. Only through this quizzing of his sources is Griffiths able to show how deeply rooted the issues are in fundamental Buddhist concerns and what serious problems they reveal at the heart of the tradition. What prevents Griffiths from lapsing into the hallowed somnolence of the scholarly doxographer is his contempt for historicist relativism and his sturdy trust in the universality and binding force of rational argument. There is much justice in his remark that "superficial understandings (and misunderstandings) of the late Wittgenstein and the classical Quine, . . . the fuss in philosophy of science over the early Kuhn's incommensurability thesis and Feyerabend's fulminations

against method, and the vogue for deconstructionist readings of any and all genres of text . . . have combined to create an intellectual climate in which it is problematic even to suggest that rational discourse . . . operates by recognizably similar rules and with effectively identical goals cross-culturally, and is thus a tool available in a relatively straightforward manner for cross-cultural communication and assessment" (p. xvii).

Nevertheless, I balk at the statement that "philosophy is a trans-cultural human activity, which in all essentials operates within the same conventions and by the same norms in all cultures" (ibid.). When Griffiths finds in early Buddhism a formulation of the principle of sufficient reason (pp. 31–32), or when he speaks of *the* mind-body problem, as if "mind" and "body" had the same range of semantic connotation in all cultures, one feels that something of the otherness and originality of the Buddhist horizon has been chopped off. The formula "When x exists y exists; from the arising of x, y arises. When x does not exist y does not exist; from the cessation of x, y ceases" stems from a very different horizon from that of Leibniz's "*nihil est sine ratione*." The latter carries a universal ontological thrust; it is a thesis about the nature of being. It also contains the imperative to locate the supreme reason explaining the whole of being. The formula of dependent co-arising, in contrast, bears more on the texture of the karmic interplay between the factors constituting *samsāra*. Griffiths' reformulation "For the occurrence of any given event Y, there exists a necessary and sufficient condition X" puts the accent in the wrong place. In Buddhism insight into causal enchainment is not valorized as a powerful speculative breakthrough promising intellectual mastery of the world (cf. the too intellectualist accounts of ignorance and wisdom on p. 14 and pp. 22–33); rather such insight reveals the illusoriness, impermanence, insubstantiality of the dependently co-arising condition. Aiming to cut the causal bonds rather than to submit to them, Buddhism might even be seen as stepping aside from the claim of the Leibnizian principle as Heidegger tries to; *nirvāṇa* is beyond causality, as even God is not for Leibniz. But it is misleading to suggest that Buddhism had any pressing concern with the quest for ultimate grounds and reasons developed to such an extreme in the West. To talk of Buddhist wisdom and Western speculation in the same breath evidently demands hermeneutical preliminaries of great delicacy, the necessity of which Griffiths seems not to notice.

While Griffiths' demonstration of the logical dilemmas of Buddhism is masterly, I think it might also be enriched by a study of the ambivalence attaching to the ideal of cessation from the very start. This was no doubt an inheritance from previous yogic tradition, and one which had a sacrosanct aura as the summit of *samādhi*. Does Griffiths do justice to this in his cool description of it as a coma or catalepsy (p. 11)? As in Christian theology, do the scholastic dilemmas not reflect deeper opposing forces at the level of primary religious conviction? Deconstruction of the fabric of theological argument is richer if it remains attuned to the spiritual matrix, however forgotten, which gave rise to such theology (consider the Western debates on grace and predestination).

Griffiths has shown that logic is indeed a universal passport, to be used to

the utmost—not suspended due to misguided ecumenical etiquette—when one embarks on cross-cultural study. But he has also perhaps shown, unwittingly, that logic is not the primary determinant of human intellectual questing. One might also ask if the *style* of the argumentation in Griffith's sources quite matches his logically tidier reproduction of this argumentation. As I cannot read Sanskrit or Pali, I am in no position to muse on Quinean indeterminacies of translation here; but just consider what happens when “*vijñāna*” becomes “consciousness,” “*abhidharma*” becomes “metaphysics,” and “*sati*” becomes “exists,” and the accumulated distortions of even the most faithful translation of long paragraphs may be imagined. Even the translated texts seem to come from a different world than that in which Griffith's paraphrases of them move.

Immensely enlightening as Griffiths' writing is (cf. the extremely helpful account of Yogācāra on pp. 80–96), he does ill to ignore the hermeneutical chasms that open up at every step of the enterprise of intellectual translation. He has still much to learn, as we all have, from Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and the other major theorists of meaning and interpretation. Not to take advantage of such resources is to fall back into the camp of the merely positivist historians of ideas, a camp to which one of such vivid intelligence clearly does not belong.

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