book review of Jay Garfield's
Engaging Buddhism — extended version

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prefatory remark

When the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (AJP) asked me to review Jay Garfield's (2015) book *Engaging Buddhism*[2] I didn't realize that they have a 400-word limit for "Book Notes". That's the book-review equivalent of a *haiku*, which posed an interesting challenge, but which also required cutting 90% of the things I have (or want) to say about Garfield's book. This "extended version" of my review includes both the pre-publication version of my "Book Note" for AJP and a some additional, more detailed comments.

pre-publication version of my "Book Note" for AJP[3]

In the preface of his book Garfield observes that the term "philosophy" customarily denotes *Western* philosophy and that this is reflective of a problematic parochialism. A truly global philosophy needs to seriously engage with non-Western traditions, and as a step towards that goal Garfield attempts to bring Buddhist philosophy within the mainstream philosophical sphere of attention. In nine topical chapters he covers various aspects of Buddhist philosophy, from metaphysics to ethics, pointing out possible points of engagement along the way. The tenth and last chapter is methodological, which suggests that it is intended as a methodology for the project of "engaging Buddhism" rather than for the book itself, raising questions about the relation of the book to that project. That the book is not *part* of the project is not just suggested by the placement of the methodology chapter, but also by the lack of dialogue between Western and Buddhist perspectives. Supposedly the book is meant to be a prologue to the project, but that only raises the same question again. Garfield's book is heavily biased towards his interpretation of (mainly) Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, and therefore, too sectarian to serve as an introduction. Moreover, he mentions in the preface that there already are good introductions available. Neither is the book meant to be a defense of the project, as that too is redundant according to the preface. Furthermore, it does (probably inadvertently) a better job at pointing out obstacles than at presenting a compelling argument for engagement. Garfield is overly optimistic about terminological difficulties and underestimates the distance between the two supposed partners in dialogue. Conflicting dogmas – such as Buddhist anti-essentialism versus mainstream essentialism – may preclude engagement, and from a mainstream perspective, Garfield's claim that "an important implication of Madhyamaka metaphysics is [...] that paraconsistent logics may be the only logics adequate to reality" (p. 68) only leads to the conclusion that – by *modus tollens* – Madhyamaka metaphysics is wrong. Further emphasizing the ambivalence of its purpose, the book is best where it is least concerned with the project. Its best chapter – that on ethics – is

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1   Version of 09/14/2015.

2   Garfield, Jay L., *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

3   Final version published online on September 12th, 2015 and in print in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* ?.?, p. ?. <www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00048402.2015.1082611>

good *not* because it engages with Western ethics or invites engagement, but because of its contribution to the ongoing debate on the interpretation of Buddhist ethics. Unfortunately, its ambivalent purpose, sectarianism, and other problems make it unlikely that the book will promote the engagement Garfield desires.

additional comments

As mentioned, Garfield's book is meant to be a step towards the goal of bringing Buddhist philosophy within the mainstream philosophical sphere of attention (which itself is a step within a larger project of creating a truly global philosophy). Nevertheless, while the book is thus supposed to play an essential role in the project of "engaging Buddhism", book and project need to be kept apart and assessed separately. For that reason I will first discuss a number of problems for the project as these surface in the book (at least in my opinion), and secondly discuss some aspects of the book itself.

some problems for the project of engaging Buddhism

[1] *Terminological problems* — Garfield points out a number of times that Sanskrit "*satya*" can mean both truth and reality, and suggests that this is philosophically interesting. In section 4 of chapter 10, he broadens this into a general claim that the polysemy or ambiguity (although he does not use those terms) of certain Pali/Sanskrit offers important philosophical insights. He mentions a number of examples of such polysemous core concepts and states that "each draws together what appears from a Western point of view to be a vast semantic range into what appears from a Buddhist perspective to be a semantic point" (p. 331). A paragraph above that he argues that we should take the resulting perspectives seriously.

If a language makes more fine-grained distinctions than English (and there are plenty of languages that do, as English is a more blunt and more exotic tool for philosophical analysis than many philosophers seem to realize), then switching to that language (even occasionally) may result in valuable philosophical insights. However, I doubt that the reverse is true, which Garfield is suggesting. Switching to a language that makes *less* rather than more fine-grained distinctions is more likely to produce confusion and fallacious arguments (through equivocation) than insight.

Garfield's example of "*satya*" does not suggest anything philosophically interesting. That the notions of truth and reality are closely related is obvious without having a single word for them, while having a single word may lead to the false conclusion that they are the same notion. That they aren't should be obvious by taking into consideration that their predicate forms take different subjects: "true" is predicated over sentences, propositions, beliefs, or something similar, and "real" is predicated over objects, events, and so forth. That is a fundamental metaphysical distinction, and brushing it under a terminological carpet can only lead to confusion. Probably, "*satya*" is a relatively innocent example, but at least two other, more problematic examples of polysemy are revealed in Garfield's book: "*dukkha*" and "dependence".

[1a] *Dukkha* — There is no concept as fundamental to Buddhist thought as *dukkha*. (Hence the title of section 2 of chapter 1: "the ubiquity of dukkha".) Garfield doesn't translate the Pali term "*dukkha*", but its most common translation is "suffering". The very purpose of Buddhism is to ameliorate or even terminate *dukkha*, and among its most central teachings is that *dukkha* is pervasive: everyone suffers (from) *dukkha*. The problem, however, – which is nicely illustrated by Garfield's explanation in the section mentioned – is that the concept of *dukkha* is so polysemous, so broad and gerrymandered, that its explanatory usefulness

is dubious at best. Even worse, the core claim of the pervasiveness of *dukkha* is plastered with seemingly *ad hoc* clauses to block any attempt at refutation, and is therefore, (intentionally!) unfalsifiable. Consequently, the notion of *dukkha* is a metaphysical notion in the early 20th century pejorative sense of "metaphysics".[4] It is explanatory useless and unfalsifiable, and therefore, has no place in any serious science or philosophy.

[1b] *Dependence* — As explained in chapter 2 of Garfield's book, "dependence" is the most fundamental concept in Buddhist metaphysics. What exists dependently, has no essence or "self-being". This is the foundation below Buddhist anti-essentialism and its rejection of selves (as well as various other things). However, "dependence" is a polysemous notion: it includes causal, conceptual, and part-whole dependence. If something is dependent in one of these three senses then it exists dependently and thus has as no essence or "self-being". So far so good, but Madhyamaka metaphysics arouses the suspicion that from this idea, it is invalidly inferred that if something has no self-being then it is dependent in all three senses.

To make the problem as clear as possible, let's formalize it. The premise that what exists dependently, has no essence or "self-being" can be formalized straightforwardly as:

(1) $\forall x\,[\,\text{dependent}(x) \rightarrow \neg\,\text{self-being}(x)\,]$,

and the claim that there are three kinds of dependence as:

(2) $\forall x\,[\,(\,\text{causal-dep}(x) \lor \text{conceptual-dep}(x) \lor \text{part-whole-dep}(x)\,) \rightarrow \text{dependent}(x)\,]$,

but notice that the conditional should be a bi-conditional if there are three *and only* three kinds of dependence.
From (1) and (2), it follows (by hypothetical syllogism) that what is dependent in one of these three senses has no self-being:

(3) $\forall x\,[\,(\,\text{causal-dep}(x) \lor \text{conceptual-dep}(x) \lor \text{part-whole-dep}(x)\,) \rightarrow \neg\,\text{self-being}(x)\,]$.

However, from (3) nothing can be inferred about that what has no self-being. Inferring that this "thing" is dependent in at least one of the three senses (disjunctively) would be the fallacy of affirming the consequent. Madhyamaka metaphysics arouses the *suspicion* of being even more fallacious than that, and changing the disjunction into a conjunction as well:

(4*) $\forall x\,[\,\neg\,\text{self-being}(x) \rightarrow (\,\text{causal-dep}(x) \land \text{conceptual-dep}(x) \land \text{part-whole-dep}(x)\,)\,]$,

which is, of course, invited by using the term "dependence" for three different kinds of dependence. If the conditional in (1) would be a biconditional, then it would follow that

(5*) $\forall x\,[\,\neg\,\text{self-being}(x) \rightarrow \text{dependent}(x)\,]$,

but the apparent next step in the argument is the idea that if something is dependent it is dependent in all three senses (or that if it is independent in one sense, then it is independent in another), which cannot be validly inferred from (2). This critique, however, *may* be moot. As mentioned, Madhyamaka metaphysics arouses the *suspicion* of being based on fallacious reasoning, but it is (nearly?) impossible to judge whether it is indeed as the arguments are much too obscure to find out, even in explanations of those arguments to

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4   It needs to be kept in mind that Buddhism is a religion (as well as a philosophical tradition), and that *dukkha* is a religious concept and the claim of the pervasiveness of *dukkha* is a religious claim. No religion allows falsification of its core concepts and core claims.

Western audiences such as the one by Garfield in his book. And this is probably even more problematic than a fallacy would be.

[2] *The need of regimentation* — The last observation points at another problem for the project: the obscurity of (most) Buddhist philosophy, and the fact that exegesis consistently fails in *sufficiently* reducing that obscurity. Buddhist philosophy does not need further explanation to make engagement by mainstream philosophers possible – it needs regimentation (in a more or less Quinean sense of that term). If an argument is insufficiently clear to be checked for formal (and informal) fallacies, then it is no candidate for serious engagement, at least not by mainstream (analytic) philosophers.

[3] *Conflicting dogmas* — Garfield consistently underestimates the ideological distance between Buddhism and mainstream Western philosophy. Buddhist philosophy is anti-essentialist, but since Kripke re-instated Aristotelian essentialism, mainstream philosophy has been essentialist. (I'm not denying, of course, that some Western philosophers have – rightly, in my opinion – rejected essentialism.) For Buddhism, anti-essentialism is a dogma as much as its opposite is a dogma for mainstream (analytic) philosophy. And that is not the only such conflict. For example, Buddhist philosophy adheres to mind/body dualism, which is rejected by virtually everyone in mainstream philosophy. Such conflicting dogmas cannot just be ignored as Garfield does: they pose formidable obstacles to real engagement between Buddhist and Western, mainstream philosophy. They may even make such engagement impossible.

In his book, Garfield ignores some of the most controversial aspects of Buddhist philosophy, such as mind/body dualism and reincarnation,[5] while in other cases (*i.e.* essentialism) he seems to misjudge the extent of disagreement. But as Donald Lopez pointed out in *The Scientific Buddha* (2012) many of these aspects are not just controversial, they are also *essential* aspects of Buddhist thought. For example, it is hard to overstate the influence of the belief in reincarnation on Buddhist thought. Central notions such as *karma*, the twelve causes, and much of Buddhist ethics cannot be made good sense of if the belief in reincarnation is not taken into account. One can, of course, just try to eliminate or ignore the controversial aspects of Buddhist thought, as Garfield attempts to do, but it is not likely that the result will be any more coherent, or any closer to mainstream, Western thought.[6]

some problems for the book *Engaging Buddhism*

[4] *The pot and the kettle* — As mentioned, Garfield points out that "philosophy" in practice means "Western philosophy", while other (*i.e.* non-Western) traditions need an adjective. Hence, there is "Chinese philosophy", "Indian philosophy", and plain "philosophy", but that last plain notion (usually) refers to Western philosophy rather than all of it together. What Garfield doesn't mention is that something very similar is the case for "Buddhist philosophy". Without any further adjective that term means "*Indian* Buddhist philosophy", sometimes including its Tibetan extension, and in the same way that non-Western philosophies need adjectives and are therefore implicitly excluded from the "philosophy" category, non-Indian Buddhist philosophies also need adjectives and are implicitly excluded from the "Buddhist philosophy" category. This is reflected in textbooks: those on "philosophy" usually only cover

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5   On p. 4 Garfield remarks that he ignores these aspects because he does not consider them "important sites of engagement".

6   Furthermore, one may wonder whether what is left can still be called "Buddhism". Lopez also makes this point in his aforementioned book.

Western philosophy; those on "Buddhist philosophy" typically only cover Indian Buddhist philosophy.

Garfield is well aware of all of this and tries to avoid the obvious charge that he is doing the same thing that he is accusing mainstream, Western philosophy of, but he only pays a tiny bit of attention to non-Indian/Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and even that tiny bit of attention seems to serve no other purpose than to try to avoid this charge. At no point does Garfield seriously engage with non-Indian/Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. Dōgen is quoted a few times, and there are some short sections on Chinese Buddhist philosophy, but these remain marginal notes, detached from the main "story". Moreover, his superficial characterization of Huayan metaphysics as a "grand and dizzying metaphysical conclusion" (p. 76) "verging on a kind of mysticism" (p. 79) raises doubts whether he is even *willing* to seriously engage with non-Indian/Tibetan Buddhist philosophy.

[5] *What's the point?* — The main problem for Garfield's book is the one identified in my Book Note for AJP (see above): its ambivalent purpose in general, and its relation to the project of engaging Buddhism in particular.

"I am less concerned with *lectio* (exegesis) than with *applicatio* (deployment)," writes Garfield (p. 14) but the book is 90% *lectio* and of the remaining 10% the bulk concerns rules or guidelines for *applicatio* by others (rather than *applicatio* itself). The only non-exegetical parts of the book are the first section of chapter 1 and the 10th chapter, which deals with methodology. As mentioned, the placement of that methodological chapter at the end of the book strongly suggests that it presents methodological guidelines for others rather than for the book itself; it is a (desired) methodology for the project rather than for the book. That the methodological chapter is the last also seems to imply that the preceding nine chapters are intended to be some kind of preamble to the project.

That the book is not *part* of the project is also suggested by a lack of the engagement between Western and Buddhist philosophy it advocates. Garfield summarizes the philosophical ideas of his favorite Buddhist sects (Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and Geluk/*dGe lugs*), occasionally supplementing them with ideas from other sects, and points out possible points of engagement between those ideas and ideas in Western philosophy (but he spends many more pages on exegesis than on pointing out possible connections), but at no point does anything resembling a dialogue (or similar kind of "engagement") develop.

The term "dialogue" in this context is somewhat metaphorical. The "dialogue" is a hypothetical, pretend dialogue in the mind of the researcher. That researcher, however, has no reason to engage in such a "dialogue", nor can she effectively carry it out (or simulate it), if she is already convinced of the truth of one of the sides (or partners) in the encounter. "Dialogue" is possible only if she believes that *both* sides are (at least partly) *wrong* but have (at least) some valuable ideas, and that they need (to listen to) each other to get closer to truth (or something similar).[7] In the last decade or so, comparative philosophy has been developing in this direction. Philosophers like Bo Mou, for example, have been combining ideas from different traditions (analytic and Chinese philosophy in Mou's case) in attempts to solve philosophical problems that – in their perspective – neither tradition can solve on its own. And contrary to Garfield, Bo Mou "practices what he preaches": he is not just one of the leading voices defending a "constructive

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7   I have my doubts whether "dialogue" is the most appropriate metaphor as it presupposes the ability to honestly and accurately voice both sides in the debate and simulate the process towards agreement, and denies the researcher herself an active role in the debate (other than that of mediator). This requires more from the researcher than can be expected, but is also deceptive: the researcher decides the terms and questions, selects and weighs the arguments, and derives the conclusions. The actual practice is nothing like a dialogue (not even like an internal one) and neither should it be. Perhaps, a more useful metaphor is that of a scavenger: rather than simulating a pretend dialogue in her head, the researcher scavenges the carcasses of Western and Buddhist (*etc.*) philosophy for digestible bits (*i.e.* bits she can use).

engagement" approach to comparative philosophy, but consistently applies the approach in his own work.

Oddly, Garfield seems to be completely unaware of this development in comparative philosophy. "The days when 'comparative philosophy' was the task are over," (p. 3) he claims, overlooking the fact that comparative philosophy has already been evolving in the direction of the engagement he advocates, but does not follow himself. More serious engagement takes place in comparative philosophy of the last decade than in the pages of Garfield's book, and for obvious reasons. "Dialogue is a two-way affair," writes Garfield (p. 326), but that implies symmetry or (sufficient) equality in status between the prospective partners in dialogue, while Garfield's treatment of Buddhist and Western philosophy is fundamentally asymmetrical. "Dialogue" is impossible if one believes that one side has (almost) all the right answers, or if one begins by assuming that the Buddha was a genius (p. 9) and effectively awards Buddhist philosophy a protected status. Serious engagement prioritizes solutions (to philosophical problems) rather than traditions, and serious engagement starts with the idea that both traditions are (at least partly) wrong and need each other to move on. If this book makes one thing clear, however, it is that Garfield's priority is the Buddhist tradition. Although he claims the contrary in the methodological chapter, all the rest of the book suggests that what Garfield has in mind is not a dialogue between equals, but a Western *audience* for Buddhist wisdom.

Moreover, not only does Garfield not engage in dialogue himself, he even attempts to obstruct dialogue/engagement in at least one area: that of ethics. As mentioned in my AJP Book Note, the chapter on ethics interferes in a debate about the interpretation of Buddhist ethics, but the nature of that interference is a rejection of theories that build bridges between Buddhist and Western ethics (such as Goodman's consequentialist interpretation and Keown's virtue-ethical interpretation) in favor of an interpretation that makes Buddhist ethics so fundamentally different that no meaningful dialogue is possible. (Additionally, the chapter also reveals that Garfield prioritizes "correct" interpretation over constructive engagement.)

All of this can only lead to the conclusion that Garfield's call for engagement is dishonest: engagement (or dialogue) is not what he really wants, which raises the question, of course, what it is that he *does* want. One of the stated intentions of the book is to show that Buddhist philosophy "provide[s] ideas and arguments that contemporary philosophy can and should take seriously" (p. 14; see also p. 320), and that indeed seems to be the book's main aim. Garfield wants Buddhist philosophy to be taken seriously by mainstream colleagues, and perhaps most of all, he wants himself to be taken seriously as a philosopher rather than "merely" an expert on Buddhist thought. There is something curious about this craving for mainstream recognition, however, as it comes with a rejection of some of the mainstream's most central tenets such as (Aristotelian/Kripkean) essentialism and classical logic. It reminds me of a story a colleague once told me about a philosopher who used to go to the mathematics department of his university to tell the mathematicians there that they were wrong.[8] Garfield is doing something similar: he demands the mainstream to welcome him in their midst and respectfully listen while he tells them – in a language they do not understand – that they are wrong in some of their core beliefs.

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8   I'll leave out the details of the story to avoid identifying anyone.