

Owen Flanagan

The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized.

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In *The Bodhisattva's Brain*, Owen Flanagan presents a naturalistic view of Buddhism. 'Buddhism naturalised' is a Buddhism without 'the mind-numbing and wishful hocus pocus' (3). That is, it is a Buddhism 'without rebirth ... a karmic system ... nirvana ... bodhisattvas flying on lotus leaves ... Buddha worlds ... nonphysical states of mind ... any deities ... oracles ... lamas who are reincarnations of lamas' (3). The aim of the book is to examine what is left once we remove hocus pocus from Buddhism.

While it is not clear to me what would be left once we removed nirvāṇa and some other views that Flanagan classifies as 'hocus pocus' from Buddhism, some of the other ideas Flanagan mentions under this heading are, indeed, superfluous even from some Buddhists' point of view. This is not to say that no Buddhists have embraced these ideas: some of them, at least, have and do. Many Japanese Buddhists, especially contemporary Zen Buddhists, however, would find bodhisattvas flying on lotus leaves and reincarnated lamas rather foreign. They don't necessarily reject them, but they don't think of them as central to their Buddhism.

This means that naturalising Buddhism is not necessarily foreign to Buddhism *tout court*, even though there are some Buddhists who would object to the whole enterprise. So I think that Flanagan has a worthy aim. It is an interesting and important project to examine what a naturalistic analytic philosopher would find valuable in Buddhism. Once we isolate what is naturalistically respectable in Buddhism, we can see a wealth of philosophical insight from which analytic philosophers and scientific naturalists can benefit. *The Bodhisattva's Brain* tries to do just that.

Flanagan's presentation of Buddhism naturalised proceeds largely in two parts. In the first part, Flanagan examines or reexamines a 'science of happiness'. In the second part, he presents Buddhism naturalised by analysing Buddhist metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. I think that Flanagan's examination of a 'science of happiness' is a success. The second part, I am not sure. In what follows I will explain the reasons for my enthusiasm for the first part and my reservations concerning the second part.

1. A Science of Happiness. In recent years, some scientists have discovered, so it is claimed, a close connection between Buddhism and happiness. By inspecting the brain states as Buddhist monks meditate, they claim to have found the 'seat of happiness'. This 'discovery' went viral in media. It was widely reported that science has confirmed the Buddhist path as leading to happiness.

The problem with this 'scientific' discovery, as Flanagan points out, is that happiness is not necessarily all in our head. Measuring chemical changes in the brain of a meditating monk may tell us something, or perhaps a lot, about the subjective mental state of the monk. However, 'happiness' does not necessarily name such a state; happiness may be alternatively conceived as involving living and being in a certain way.

Flanagan argues that an assessment of Buddhism as a path leading to happiness requires philosophical analysis of the theory of happiness and well-being that Buddhism recommends. It is only when we properly understand the relevant sense of Buddhist happiness – happiness^{Buddha} according to Flanagan’s method of disambiguation – that we can begin to work out the necessary empirical investigations for testing Buddhism as the seat of happiness^{Buddha}. (See Chapters 1 & 2.) I could not agree more.

2. Buddhism Naturalized. What, then, is happiness^{Buddha}? In *The Bodhisattva’s Brain*, Flanagan analyses naturalistically acceptable Buddhist metaphysics, epistemology and ethics to present an account of happiness^{Buddha}. While such an investigation is interesting and important, I think that what he has done in the name of naturalising Buddhism is problematic. Let me explain why I am sceptical about Flanagan’s attempt to present Buddhism naturalised.

Flanagan identifies the *Four Noble Truths* as central to Buddhism. They are: (1) there is suffering, (2) there is the origin of suffering, (3) there is the cessation of suffering, and (4) there is a way to the cessation of suffering (the *Noble Eightfold Path*). Flanagan understands the Four Noble Truths as naturalistic in the sense that they themselves don’t involve rebirth, karma, nirvāṇa and so on. Based on his naturalistic understanding of the Four Noble Truths, he then argues that Buddhism recommends an eudaimonistic theory of happiness. This is not to say that Buddhists recommend flourishing^{Aristotle} and happiness^{Aristotle} of reason^{Aristotle} and virtue^{Aristotle}. Rather, they recommend wisdom^{Buddha} and virtue^{Buddha} (and mindfulness^{Buddha}). Putting aside the question of what virtue^{Buddha} and mindfulness^{Buddha} consist of (see Chapter 6), wisdom^{Buddha} involves an apprehension of *anātman* (no-self). According to (mainstream) Buddhist metaphysics, there is no essence to who or what we are, soul or otherwise. All there is is the unfolding of processes or events that are taking place in this world. Flanagan claims that this metaphysical view is naturalistically credible.

Flanagan claims that eudaimonia^{Buddha} can be understood based on this metaphysics. Instead of focusing on the essential component of our existence, we must give equal care and concern to all (sentient) beings. Flourishing^{Buddha} must thus be understood in terms of living and being in social relations. (For Buddhist metaphysics and ethics, see Chapters 4 & 5.) Given that eudaimonia^{Buddha} is a consequence of a naturalistic metaphysics, Flanagan thinks that his account of eudaimonia^{Buddha} is without hocus pocus and, thus, naturalistic. As a result, analytic philosophers and scientific naturalists can accept it.

I think that it is a worthy aim to present a naturalistic view of eudaimonia^{Buddha}. If the Buddhist path is to be recommended to analytic philosophers and scientific naturalists, it must be able to be naturalistically conceived. However, is Flanagan engaged in the task of describing the naturalistic core of Buddhism or is he engaged in a revisionist project of fundamentally changing the character of Buddhism?

To see a tension behind this question, consider the work of Dōgen, the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen Buddhist. Dōgen emphasised living-and-being *here and now* and criticised those who think of eudaimonia^{Buddha} as a state which transcends the currently unfolding processes and events. There is a sense in which Dōgen can be understood as having provided a naturalised Buddhism. This doesn’t mean, however, that he removed nirvāṇa, rebirth and a karmic system from Buddhism. Instead, by presenting a phenomenological account of eudaimonia^{Buddha}, Dōgen reconceived these notions in

terms that are friendly to the naturalist. For example, in the *Shōji* fascicle of his *Shōbōgenzō*, he talks about nirvāṇa and rebirth in this way:

Only when you regard [literally, put in mind] birth-and-death just as nirvāṇa and you do not avoid it as birth-and-death and you don't seek it as nirvāṇa, are you free from birth-and-death.
(my translation)

Super-naturalistic metaphysics of nirvāṇa and rebirth (or birth-and-death) don't play any role in Dōgen's Zen.

Now, by naturalising nirvāṇa and rebirth (rather than discarding them), Dōgen is naturalising the Four Noble Truths. He is naturalistically characterising suffering and an escape from suffering. Dōgen's naturalistic Buddhism is a result of his attempt to understand what the Buddha meant by the Four Noble Truths. As mentioned earlier, central to Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths. This is something that Flanagan acknowledges. What he seems to have failed to recognise, however, is that they are also central to the debates within the Buddhist tradition. All Buddhists *may* accept what the Buddha said when he taught the Four Noble Truths. They disagree about what the Buddha meant, however. For some Buddhists, nirvāṇa^{supernatural}, rebirth^{supernatural} and so on constitute the Four Noble Truths (thus Four Noble Truths^{supernatural}). An acceptance of the Four Noble Truths^{naturalised} is therefore not 'theologically' innocent. Despite his repeated declarations to the contrary, Flanagan *is* engaging in doctrinal disputes. Flanagan may think that he is *describing* the naturalistic components of Buddhism. However, in presenting a naturalistic view of the Four Noble Truths, resulting in eudaimonia^{naturalised}, he has essentially engaged in a revisionist project of presenting Buddhism^{Flanagan}.

In the Preface, Flanagan writes:

Once in Korea I was told on arrival that a professor friend has warned that I would be speaking on "Buddhaganism" – Flanagan's interpretation of Buddhism. This is not a bad way to think about my opinionated interpretation and examination of Buddhist philosophy and psychology offered here. (xiii)

I think that Flanagan has provided *not* just his interpretation of Buddhism, but Buddhism^{Flanagan} as a rival to other Buddhisms. Just like Buddhism^{Dōgen}, Buddhism^{Flanagan} emphasises this-worldly phenomena. As a naturalistic thinker myself, I find Buddhism^{Flanagan} interesting. The problem is that Flanagan doesn't think that he is presenting Buddhism^{Flanagan}. He keeps claiming throughout the book (as well as in conversation) that he is not engaged with Buddhist disputes. If he wishes to avoid any doctrinal dispute, there is a way of doing so. In naturalising the Four Noble Truths, however, Flanagan cannot be neutral on the central doctrinal disputes. If his aim is to present Buddhism^{Flanagan}, Flanagan needs to come clean and present himself as such. As it stands, he is presenting Buddhism^{Flanagan} while he claims to be doing otherwise. In my opinion, Flanagan cannot have his cake and eat it too without at least acknowledging that he is doing just that.

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