

Matthew J. Moore: *Buddhism and Political Theory*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 198.)

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Buddhism and Political Theory by Matthew Moore presents a Buddhist theory of politics and develops this theory in cross-cultural comparison with Western theories of government. Moore also discusses the Buddhist modernist transition to republican forms of government (and rejections of the traditional justification of monarchy), and Buddhist metaethics and its significance for political agency and obligation. We need more dialogue between Buddhism and Western philosophy, and a book-length treatment of Buddhist political theory is thus a welcome addition to Buddhist scholarship.

Two highlights of the book are Moore's focus on Early Buddhist texts, which provide a useful resource for scholars interested in Early Buddhism, and Moore's chapter on Nietzsche and Buddhist conceptions of the self and agency. *Buddhism and Political Theory* also defends a particular Buddhist political theory, which includes (i) an emphasis on the significance of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, (ii) a minimalist conception of political responsibility and civic engagement, and (iii) an instrumental, naturalist, noncategorical, and antirealist conception of moral and political obligation.

Although these are interesting theses, the book does not live up to its claim to be the "first comprehensive treatment of Buddhism as a political theory." Instead Moore's primary political thesis is that politics and political obligation are of very limited significance. Chapter 5, *Theories of Limited Citizenship East and West*, is thus the most important chapter in the book, and yet it dedicates a mere four pages (92–95) to the Buddhist theory of politics. The focus of the rest of the chapter immediately shifts to "the Western limited citizenship tradition" (96–112). Moore's discussion of the Western tradition, however, does not build an argument for his thesis of limited citizenship. Instead, Moore provides an overview and brief summaries of Socrates, Epicurus, Thoreau, Emerson, and Yoder on the politics of Jesus. The only argument here is one of convergence—these very different traditions agree that politics is not that important. Moore's defense of his minimalist and naturalist Buddhist political theory is thus perhaps best described as a cross-cultural convergence argument.

I think that Moore either believes that the claim that "politics is of very limited importance to human life" is simply obvious, or that the convergence of these very different thinkers supports his conclusion, but I had hoped for a really substantive defense of his core political thesis. The problem with a convergence argument is that one can also easily line up counterarguments, East and West, for the centrality and importance of politics, from Aristotle to Confucius to the more recent theories of John Rawls and Tu Weiming.

In addition, the short discussions of non-Buddhist thinkers are not helpful in establishing that a minimalist conception of politics is the most

philosophically favored Buddhist position. Instead, a critical discussion of other Buddhist views, especially the Engaged Buddhist tradition, is absolutely essential. Indeed, how can a book on Buddhism and political thought not acknowledge and take seriously Engaged Buddhism, which rejects the minimalist conception of citizenship? I would also have expected an exploration of the political significance of the Bodhisattva ideal in general. Moore argues that his exclusive focus on the early texts is justified because all Buddhist traditions recognize the authenticity of these texts. The problem with this argument is that the Mahayana tradition explicitly argues that the early Buddhist teachings are incomplete. The Lotus Sutra, for example, argues that the early teachings are partial truths for the less enlightened.

In general, the Bodhisattva vow to strive for the enlightenment of all sentient being shifts the moral focus from personal enlightenment to boundless compassion. Just as the antislavery Fourteenth Amendment transformed the US constitutional system, the Mahayana shift supersedes and transforms these Buddhist traditions. A comprehensive Buddhist political theory, which takes Engaged Buddhism seriously, would have to consider the ways in which the basic structure of society can be a tool of oppression (which is always rooted in egocentrism and the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion), and the ways in which the basic structure of society can instead promote self-development, community, and liberation. Indeed, the basic structure of society is the primary subject of social justice, and as such it should be a concern of all compassionate beings, especially Buddhists.

Leaving aside the political theory of limited citizenship, Moore's book is composed of a series of other interesting discussions. Moore divides his book into two parts. Part I is composed of three chapters on "Buddhism's Theory of Government." The first two chapters summarize the discussions of political theory (chap. 1) and the theory of government, which is a version of enlightened monarchy (chap. 2) that we find in the Early Buddhist texts. Moore includes substantial quotes from a range of central texts accompanied by clear commentary. These two chapters are a useful reference resource for anyone working on Buddhist political theory.

The third chapter, "Buddhism Modernism 1850–1950," provides a basic overview of the political transformations of selected Buddhist countries from monarchy to either republicanism or constitutional monarchy. After a brief survey of the literature, Moore argues that the secondary literature offers "two basic positions: (1) that the republican transformation has no justification in the early or traditional texts and is flatly a pragmatic and/or cynical invention in response to circumstances; (2) that the transformation rests on some themes in the various historical texts, and that the shift from monarchy to republicanism represents a defensible change in interpretation and emphasis, rather than wholesale invention" (43). Moore next considers the transformations of Bhutan, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Tibet's diaspora government in exile (49–60). In each case study, Moore reviews the transitions to republican forms of government

and argues that both explanations have merit. But he also tries to categorize each country as fitting into one or the other explanation. Since both pragmatic and principled considerations are probably always in play, I am not sure what is accomplished by this exercise in categorization. Also it seems clear that different actors, classes, and constituencies will have different motivations.

In addition, this chapter seems out of place in a book on political theory. The country-by-country survey explores motivation and causation but not justification. The question for theory is whether republican forms of government are justified on Buddhist principles. As political science, the tertiary case studies of the secondary literature are too brief and superficial. Of course, the arguments offered for modernization are relevant to the question of justification, but the particular case studies are not germane. In short, although interesting, the case studies are either too superficial as political science or unnecessary for political theory.

Finally, the connection between the three chapters of part I is unclear. In particular, although the Early Buddhist textual references to political theory and government provide a useful resource, the jump from Early Buddhist texts to the politics of Buddhist Modernism is puzzling and insufficiently motivated. If the goal were to provide an historical analysis of Buddhism and its influence on politics, then the developments of political systems under Buddhist influences for almost two centuries before 1850 would be of central interest. Surprisingly, in these three chapters on government, Moore does not discuss the influence of the model provided by first Buddhist king Asoka or the role of the community of monks, the Sangha, as a mediating influence between the monarchy and the people. These are themes emphasized in most other discussions of Buddhist political theory.

Part II is also comprised of three chapters. Chapter 4, "Overcoming versus Letting Go: Nietzsche and Buddha on the Self and Politics," is the most philosophical substantive chapter of the book. I recommend this chapter to anyone interested in Nietzsche and Buddhism. As already discussed, chapter 5, "Theories of Limited Citizenship," is primarily an overview of *non*-Buddhist views of limited citizenship. Chapter 6, "Buddhism, Naturalistic Ethics, and Politics," argues for an instrumentalist, noncategorical, naturalist interpretation of Buddhist ethics. The book concludes by reviewing the three aspects of Buddhist political theory emphasized throughout the book: the theory of limited citizenship; the instrumental account of ethics, and the significance of the doctrine of no-self.

In conclusion, this is a difficult book to recommend to particular readers because of the discrete and varied nature of the chapters: chapters 1 and 2 present summaries of ancient texts with analysis and synthesis; chapters 3 and 5 are primarily literature reviews combined with short discussions; in contrast, chapter 4 develops a philosophical argument defending the Buddhist view of the self and agency and rejecting the Nietzschean alternative; and chapter 6 is another, more substantial discussion of Buddhist

metaethics. The book as a whole raises a range of issues and questions worthy of exploration.

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Angus Fletcher: *Comic Democracies: From Ancient Athens to the American Republic*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. Pp. 209.)

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Angus Fletcher can kill a joke stone-cold dead. But that is not his fault—if writing comedically is difficult, writing comedically about comedy is well-nigh impossible. And when one attempts to do so syncretically and over a two-millennium history, little room is left for the actual funny stuff. Given those limitations, Fletcher has wisely chosen to track humor's effects; he traces these effects across the political history of the West (with particular attention to ancient Greece, modern England, and the United States) rather than trying to develop a theory of political humor or attempting to replicate what has drawn audiences to satirists from Aristophanes to John Oliver—which is to say, Fletcher takes humor very seriously. By doing so, he is able to outline long lines of political work and humorous writing and to note some startling convergences among them.

This differs from the more common question of “how comedy works,” a probably unanswerable complexity upon whose shoals other analysts have foundered. In the contemporary ethno-nationalist world, comedy would seem to offer today's democracy very little. Satire appears toothless in the face of radical racialism; parody offers little leverage against totalitarian tendencies. Yet the unpleasant nature of the particular limitations of representational politics offers hope for Fletcher, as it may lead us back to what made comedy so efficacious in the first place.

Fletcher warns that the electoral model of democracy has become sclerotic and insufficient. While it purports to represent a unified will of “the people” through a commitment to constitutional norms expressed by occasional ballots, in truth its formal commitments have limited and constrained the democratic potential of politics. Fletcher suggests an alternative, an older and more robust concept of democracy, taken from the Greeks, which draws on the “practical dimensions” (18) of Athenian democracy. The ethos of such a *demokratia*, he convincingly shows, shares considerable overlap with a successful comedic form.