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Jan Westerhoff. *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 256 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-538496-3.

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Westerhoff's Nāgārjuna

Jan Westerhoff's *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka* is a provocative, careful, and detailed study of themes raised in several works ascribed to the eminent Indian Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna. The book aims to elucidate these themes in a philosophically responsible way–a way that attends to issues of argument, coherence, and logical structure. It considerably advances our understanding of certain philosophical dimensions of the texts with which it deals, and is to be recommended to anyone interested in Buddhist philosophy.

Westerhoff reads Nāgārjuna as articulating a philosophical theory that is both systematic and unified. Though acknowledging that works attributed to Nāgārjuna raise various issues in metaphysics, logic, epistemology, and the philosophy of language, Westerhoff hopes to show that these issues are in fact aspects of a larger, "unified philosophical theory which is Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka" (p. 199). His insistence that Nāgārjuna was thus concerned to offer "a single, unified system of thought" is animated by his aspiration to present Nāgārjuna as a Buddhist philosopher par excellence, and by the implicit assumption that unified theories are what any philosopher, properly so-called, ought to be in the business of offering (p. 11). Contrasting his own, "systematic perspective" with the kind that "takes the form of commentaries on specific texts," Westerhoff ambitiously aims "to present a synoptic overview of Nāgārjuna's arguments concerning different philosophical problems in order to present an account of the whole of his philosophy, showing how its individual parts fit together as elements of a single philosophical project" (p. 1).

To recover Nāgārjuna's philosophical project, Westerhoff must, of course, rely on texts. He is well aware of the problems that beset attempts to pin down which specific texts were composed by the author of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (with "Nāgārjuna" axiomatically referring to the author of that text), but he opts to follow a long-standing Tibetan tradition according to which the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is one among six works categorized as the "collection of six texts on reasoning" (*rigs pa'i tshogs drug*). Westerhoff enumerates the relevant texts according to what has become a standard dGe lugs pa account; in addition, then, to the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna's works are here taken to include the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, *Śūnyatāsaptati*, *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*, and *Ratnāvalī*. These texts, taken together, represent the sources from which Westerhoff principally draws, and he sees in them a unified "Yukti-corpus" (p. 6).

Of course, doubts have been raised regarding the authorship of several of the texts included among the *rigs tshogs*–and Westerhoff knows this. "We cannot," he acknowledges, "be sure that all six texts were indeed composed by Nāgārjuna" (p. 6). Yet Westerhoff argues that this fact need not pose an obstacle to his project, and that the texts may properly be treated as a group, insofar as they "expound a single, coherent philosophical system" (p. 6). In his view, this system is precisely the system articulated and endorsed by the author of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

Thus, to a certain extent, Westerhoff allows questions of authorship to recede into the background. What really matters, for his purposes, is not so much whether a text can be shown to have been *composed* by Nāgārjuna as whether the text's *philosophical content* is *continuous* with the project of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. If so, then the text espouses Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, whether or not the same person happens to have been its author. Questions of authorship are not, however, allowed to disappear completely. As the book's title makes

clear, Westerhoff wants to claim that the philosophical content he aims to elucidate in this book represents not just *a* unified system of philosophical reflection, but *Nāgārjuna's* unified system of philosophical reflection–and so he has some interest in associating Nāgārjuna's name with the texts he counts among the Yukti-corpus. To secure this association–at least provisionally–Westerhoff reads the continuity of philosophical content he sees in the Yukti-corpus as contributing evidence in support of a claim to singularity of authorship.

Not all readers will be completely satisfied with this approach–and Westerhoff himself occasionally argues in ways that may cast doubt on it. So, for example, immediately after noting that questions regarding the authorship of the texts of the Yukti-corpus have prompted debate among modern scholars, Westerhoff writes: "In some cases [these texts] are accompanied by an autocommentary in prose, though the status of these autocommentaries is not always unproblematic. Since this inquiry is intended to be a study of *Nāgārjuna's* Madhyamaka, the texts of the Yukti-corpus constitute the basis of our discussion" (p. 6, emphasis original). By "not always unproblematic," Westerhoff means–as he clarifies in a footnote–that the authorship of the putative autocommentaries has been the subject of recent scholarly debate (p. 6n11). But if the fact that the authorship of a commentary has been debated justifies downplaying its contribution to our knowledge of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, why does the fact that the authorship of a root text has likewise been debated not warrant its dismissal in the same way? Westerhoff does not say.

In the end, the reader is left with the impression that Westerhoff is not particularly concerned with whether the same historical person wrote all of the texts of the Yukti-corpus; his worries are not principally over the identity of the texts' author(s), but over what the texts say and imply. Following a brief introduction, then, each of the book's chapters takes up a particular theme and subjects it to detailed philosophical investigation. These themes will be familiar to anyone who has spent time mulling over Madhyamaka texts. They include the notion of *svabhāva* (treated in chapter 2), negation (chapter 3), the *catuṣkoṭi* (chapter 4), causation (chapter 5), motion (chapter 6), the self (chapter 7), epistemology (chapter 8), and language (chapter 9). A final chapter summarizes the study's findings and sets out Westerhoff's understanding of Nāgārjuna's philosophical project as a whole.

Any of these chapters could serve as the basis of a separate review article, and all should be subjected to close analysis and assessment by both philosophers and Indologists. Given the space constraints of this review, a chapter-by-chapter attempt to summarize Westerhoff's conclusions in each would be superficial at best; at worst, it would violate the spirit of the book. Like the Yukti-corpus it addresses, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka* demands close and careful reading in order to accomplish its philosophical work. In lieu of chapter-based summaries, then, I want to raise a few more general points regarding the approach taken in the book–and regarding, as well, the way in which this approach highlights certain aspects of Nāgārjuna's philosophical voice while downplaying others.

As Westerhoff stresses throughout the book, Madhyamaka arguments typically place a great deal of weight on human conventions, the conventionality of utterances, and the like. Indeed, Westerhoff concludes his book by noting that, on Nāgārjuna's view, "in order to become truly selfless, one has to give up the view that we can obtain anything more than conventional truths, some of which might be evaluated as better than others but none of which can constitute the last word" (p. 224). What Westerhoff's fine-grained analysis makes particularly clear is that the Nāgārjuna of *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka* was in fact profoundly ambivalent toward human conventions. Such conventions appear to serve at least two distinct roles in Nāgārjuna's argumentation, insofar as they are alternately portrayed as foils for, and as aids to, understanding.

At some points in this corpus of texts, then, our conventions are represented precisely as impeding a clear understanding of the workings of the world. So, for example, Nāgārjuna famously argues that a commonsense understanding of causal production–one that reads causation as a process involving a temporal overlap between causes and their effects–simply makes no sense; our conventional presuppositions about the relation between causes and effects cannot withstand analysis.

Yet conventional understandings are not sources only of confusion; though our conventions can mislead, they can also edify. We have resources for undermining our mistaken commonsense understandings of the world, as well as for quelling the temptation to engage in forms of metaphysical extravagance (e.g., the pursuit of the chimera of convention-

transcendent explanation). These resources are ineluctably conventional; they are the very conventions that inform and constitute our practices of reasoning and philosophical disputation. Thus, we find Nāgārjuna regularly querying his interlocutors as to the reasonableness and adequacy of their presuppositions, asking them to subject their assumptions to close scrutiny in order to determine whether they represent claims they really want to make. Nāgārjuna thus demands of his readers that they–we–attend to ourselves, and to what we find ourselves drawn to say in assessing how things stand with us. In this process of interrogation and correction, we need not appeal to nonconventional tools; reasoning, though unavoidably conventional, can nevertheless help us to glimpse what is truly real (where what is truly real is itself no less conventional, as, e.g., *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* verse 67 emphasizes).

Nāgārjuna's ambivalent stance toward the conventional arguably anticipates Ludwig Wittgenstein's tantalizingly ambiguous characterization of philosophy as "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language."[1] It is, of course, impossible to know whether Nāgārjuna would agree with this characterization of philosophy, just as it is impossible to know whether he would see it as properly descriptive of his own work. If, however, the texts of the *rigs tshogs* can be read as philosophical in just this sense–if, that is, they might rightly be understood to constitute (conventional) weapons in the battle against various forms of bewitchment–one might wonder whether their effectiveness really does presuppose (with Westerhoff) their systematic theoretical unity. Should we presume that significant advances in the battle against bewitchment can be made only via recourse to unified theories? Wittgenstein notoriously rejected such a presumption; Westerhoff seems favorably inclined toward it (recall that he speaks approvingly of the "unified philosophical theory which is Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka" [p. 199]), though he does not bother to mount an argument in its support.

Despite the close association he draws between the philosophical and the theoretical, Westerhoff occasionally–and, I think, rightly–suggests that to see Madhyamaka thinkers as engaged solely in theoretical pursuits is to miss something important, since "Madhyamaka metaphysics (unlike metaphysics in the Western tradition) is *not a purely theoretical enterprise but something that also has to be put into practice*" (p. 13, emphasis added). This is an important point, and seems to me to deserve greater consideration than it receives in *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka*. To identify philosophy with systematic theory, while at the same time opposing theory and practice, would appear to leave precious little room for raising the question of what it might mean to take the *practical* dimensions of Madhyamaka thought to be partially constitutive of its specifically *philosophical* work.

In a book of the scale and ambition of *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka*, a few missteps are bound to occur. At times, Westerhoff succumbs to anachronism; we are told, for example, that a particular account of causation "is what Nāgārjuna means by saying that causes and effects do not exist from their own side," despite the fact that Westerhoff himself later admits that this description represents "a later Tibetan turn of phrase" (pp. 123-124, 199). There are occasional philological problems as well–e.g., the enumeration of the specific texts of the *rigs tshogs* is not in fact endorsed by the source that Westerhoff cites for it, the *Chos 'byung* of the fourteenth-century Tibetan historian Bu ston rin chen grub (p. 6n8). Bu ston does discuss the *rigs tshogs*, but understands the collection to include not the *Ratnāvalī*, and instead to include the *Vyavahārasiddhi* (*tha snyad grub pa*)–a text that is now (largely) lost, and whose extant fragments are not discussed in the present volume. Likewise, Westerhoff's claim that the term *svabhāva* "is never used in the sūtras" is mysterious, given that the term is found in, e.g., the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, the *Samādhirājasūtra*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, and elsewhere (p. 19). Portions of the text (e.g., 43n104) are likely to mislead readers unfamiliar with Tibetan, and some translations of Sanskrit terms are puzzling (e.g., "mover" for *gati* [pp. 136, 150]). A few minor typographical errors are also present (e.g., *Mīṃāṃsāka* for *Mīmāṃsaka* [p. 189]).

Despite these problems, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka* succeeds in elegantly elucidating many important philosophical dimensions of Madhyamaka thought. Those considering its use in graduate-level religious studies courses should note that at times–most noticeably in the chapter devoted to the *catuṣkoṭi*–Westerhoff's presentation presupposes a measure of familiarity with the tools, concepts, and examples current in philosophy departments (e.g., formalized logical notation, DeMorgan's law, Bradleyan regresses, and the like). Happily, however, the text is largely free of disciplinary jargon, and those who are not trained philosophers are likely to find the work accessible, if not always easy going.

With *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka*, Westerhoff proves himself a very capable guide to the conceptual intricacies of the *rigs tshogs*. While no substitute for grappling with the texts directly, Westerhoff's book provides an invaluable supplement to an encounter with them. His reading is charitable, sensitive, analytically rigorous, and philosophically astute, and will likely spark discussion and debate for some time to come.

Note

[1]. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), section 109.

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