

A Buddhist Response to Ankur Barua: ‘Liberation in Life: Advaita Allegories for Defeating Death’

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Ankur Barua discusses Life and the Afterlife from the perspective of Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta (ADV). His chapter quickly pivots to the question of whether it is consistent with morality. Barua’s reason for this pivot is that ADV does not admit a meaningful distinction between this life and an afterlife because it is a form of monism which denies *all* ontological distinctions. He nevertheless thinks an explanation is needed of how ADV can admit the possibility of other-regarding virtues since it lacks a distinction between self and other, and how it can avoid licencing antinomian behaviour since it lacks a distinction between good or bad actions and outcomes.

There are two main stages to Barua’s explanation. Barua first provides an account of how ADV can admit empirical distinctions. He then uses this account to explain how ADV is consistent with morality. In this short reply, I will consider some points of convergence and divergence with Buddhism.

The key to Barua’s explanation lies in the claim that ADV assumes a distinction between two different “standpoints of reality”; an “empirical reality” (*vyāvahārika*) and an “ultimate reality” (*pāramārthika*). This terminological distinction was well known and utilised by Buddhist philosophers prior to Śaṅkara. But Buddhists understood and utilised this distinction in different ways. How does Barua understand it and how might it align (or not) with Buddhist views?

Empirical or conventional reality, according to Barua, consists of spatio-temporally discrete entities, such as tables and chairs, that are perceptible by the sense modalities. Ultimate reality is the “immutable, foundational reality” (Brahman) that “gives being to all finite entities and sustains them in their existence”. The spiritual virtuoso or liberated individual (*jīvanmukta*) discerns that empirically real entities are metaphysically non-dual from Brahman. In the case of individual selves, the *jīvanmukta* discerns that deep inside themselves is a “primordial” Self (*ātman*) which is an “indivisible consciousness” that is shared by everyone and is nondual with Brahman.

Let's first consider the idea of ātman-Brahman. Śaṅkara's claim that they are identical comes from his reading of the Upaniṣads, which he treats as an authoritative expression of spiritual insight. The Buddha denies that these scriptures should be treated as authoritative. On Śaṅkara's reading of the Upaniṣads, Brahman (and thus the *ātman*, Self) has the property of being "absolutely unchanging" and "metaphysically independent of anything else". The Buddha argues that his own enlightenment does not reveal any such thing. Instead, he claims to have realised that all things are impermanent and originate in dependence on other things. There is thus no Self (*anātman*), so defined. Barua asks why we should accept the Buddha's word on this rather than the Upaniṣads. While the Buddha does present himself as an authoritative guide (offering an eightfold path to the cessation of suffering or attainment of *nirvāṇa*), he also frequently remarks that, at the end of the day, his disciples should discern the truth for themselves by following his path to completion and thereby attaining spiritual insight (e.g., AN 65.5). His position is reinforced by later Buddhist philosophers who deny scriptural authority as a valid source of knowledge and restrict epistemic means to direct perception and inference grounded in perception (Tillemans 2011).

Barua describes the ultimate reality (Brahman) as "foundational reality." He claims that it is the "reason why there are any entities at all" because it "gives being to all finite entities and sustains them in their existence." This suggests that there is a dependence relation between conventionally real things and the ultimate Reality which is, itself, "utterly ineffable, beyond all qualities". It is unclear how to conceive of this dependence relation or why one might think it necessary. Consider an Abhidharma Buddhist version of the conventional-ultimate distinction. According to this view, ultimate reality consists of causally related psycho-physical elements (e.g., elements of physical matter, of feeling, of thought, of volition, of consciousness) which are differentiated from one another by defining characteristics or inherent natures (*svabhāva*). Conventional reality, by contrast, involves the unified categorisation of these particular elements as constituents of whole objects or as instances of general kinds. This unified categorisation involves the use of memory, inference, concepts, and socio-linguistic conventions. Conventional reality might nevertheless be said to depend (in part) on the ultimate but only in the sense that the ultimate helps adjudicate true and false accounts of what is conventionally real. On Siderits (2003) analysis, an object (a kitten, say) is conventionally real if it turns out that actions that assume its conventional existence (e.g., stroking its fur) can bring about desired effects in terms that are measurable at the level of ultimate reality (e.g., a purring sound, a pleasurable feeling). It is not clear how

an undifferentiated Brahman could similarly adjudicate competing accounts of conventional reality. Some such adjudication seems necessary if Brahman can be said to sustain the existence of conventionally real things but not conventionally false things. Abhidharma also does not assume that the psycho-physical entities that exist at the ultimate level need a further foundational reality to guarantee their existence. They simply exist, if they do, due to or dependent on the causal efficacy of other ultimately existing things.

Not all Buddhists share this view of the conventional-ultimate distinction, however, and so the differences from Barua's ADV are not always so clear. Madhyamaka Buddhists worry, for instance, whether the Abhidharma view is consistent with the Buddha's claim that all things depend on other things for their existence. Their worry turns on an interpretation of defining characteristics as an essence that both differentiates ultimately real things and explains (accounts for) their existence (Tillemans 2016). Contemporary Buddhist philosophers often infer from Madhyamaka arguments that the so-called ultimate reality of Abhidharma Buddhism is itself a theoretical construct and so also a version of conventional reality (Cowherds 2011). This might be taken to imply, if there is an ultimate reality, it must be non-conceptual, undifferentiated, ineffable, and non-dual. Some Yogācāra Buddhists have been read to affirm just this implication (but not its identity with Brahman, Gold 2015). Mādhyamikas, however, are more often read as denying any ultimate reality (or as holding the paradoxical view that "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth", Garfield & Priest 2003). Of course, Mādhyamikas now face the task of justifying and differentiating versions of conventional reality (which they can't do by appeal to causal effects measurable at the level of ultimate reality). They tend to discharge this burden by claiming that conventional reality is thoroughly mistaken and illusory, with emptiness (*śūnyatā*) the spiritual insight that serves as its counterpoint. There are a lot of issues here.

How does this relate to morality? For Barua, reinstating the distinction between self and other in conventional reality is the means to securing the possibility of other-regarding virtues. Why does ADV not entail antinomian behaviour? Because, Barua argues, it is useful to operate according to the normative practices at the conventional level, which distinguish good and evil actions and outcomes, in order to eventually attain the liberating insight of nonduality (*advaita*). But what about the liberated individual (*jīvanmukta*) who has attained this liberating insight? Why are *they* not licensed to engage in antinomian behaviour? Barua suggests that the realisation of *ātman* (that we all share the same primordial Self) entails a realisation that there are no metaphysical grounds for self-interest rather than other-regarding virtues (since our primordial Self is the same). He initially admits that this could

motivate either altruistic behaviour (extended self-interest) or indifference (removal of any interest). But he later suggests that compassionate concern for others is the living expression of nonduality; a concern, it would seem, only expressible at the level of conventional reality.

What story can the Buddhist who denies the *ātman* tell about morality and other-regarding virtues? Buddhists have a lot to say about this (Finnigan 2022). Śāntideva has a similar argument for altruistic concern to the one Barua offers Śaṃkara, but with an additional move. Śāntideva takes the realisation that there is no-self to entail a further realisation that there are no metaphysical grounds for self-interest rather than concern for others (BCA 8.101-103, see Cowherds 2015, Finnigan 2018, Williams 1998). But Śāntideva also observes that we have self-interested concern in preventing *our own* suffering. He then argues, since there is no self that could own any sufferings, if there is concern to prevent suffering at all, this concern should extend to all suffering wherever it occurs. Of course, like with Barua's argument, it is just as possible for indifference to follow as altruistic behaviour (Harris 2011). But like Barua, Śāntideva supposes it motivates compassionate concern. This compassionate concern is not directed towards *suffering*, however; we want to prevent suffering, but we arguably have compassionate concern for those who *are* suffering (see Williams 1998). If this is right then, like ADV, there is reason to think that the compassionate concern of Śāntideva's spiritual virtuoso (the *bodhisattva*) would also only be expressible towards 'others' existing at the level of conventional reality.

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