

*Author Meets Readers:
Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad in Conversation with
Bruce Janz, Jessica Locke, and Cynthia Willett**

*Bruce Janz, Jessica Locke, and Cynthia Willett interact in this exchange with different aspects of Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad's book *Human Being, Bodily Being* (2018). Through "constructive intercultural thinking" (Janz), they seek to engage with Ram-Prasad's "lower-case p" phenomenology (Locke), which exemplifies "how to think otherwise about the nature and role of bodiliness in human experience" (Willett). This exchange, which includes Ram-Prasad's reply to their interventions, pushes the reader to reflect more about different aspects of bodiliness.*

Key words: bodiliness; practices of seeing; Indian Philosophy; feminisms; Buddhaghosa; thinking in places; ecological phenomenology

Ecological Phenomenology: Ram-Prasad, Bodiliness, and Experience

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For someone like myself who is not an expert in classical Indian philosophy, but who has several other points of contact with his project, there is a great deal to like about Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad's latest book, *Human Being, Bodily Being*. My interests in phenomenology and its connections with non-western thinking are fully intertwined in this book. I focus on African philosophy, which has a very different history compared to Indian philosophy. African philosophy's textual history, for instance, is vastly smaller (although not, contrary to common belief, non-existent). Despite the differences, though, there are some potentially interesting and useful points of overlap.

Ram-Prasad's observation that Indian thinkers never had the "Cartesian shock" (5) which frames so much of western philosophy after Descartes's time resonates strongly with the ways in which at least some African philosophy also does not depend on the shock of a dualist system such as that of Descartes. Concepts have a provenance insofar as or because they are passed down and altered by their uses within a set of places (for more on this, see Janz 2009),¹ and so recognizing that Indian thinkers did not have to respond to that particular framing device for questions and arguments is significant.

Human Being, Bodily Being does not engage in sweeping generalizations—there is, instead, careful textual work, a clear awareness of the tradition in which that work has significance, and an acute understanding of the western thinkers who have had to respond to other imperatives, whether

This exchange on Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad's book *Human Being, Bodily Being: Phenomenology from Classical India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) took place during the American Philosophical Association's 2019 Eastern Division meeting in New York. Panel participants were Bruce Janz, Jessica Locke, Cynthia Willett, and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad. The panel was sponsored by the APA's "Committee on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies."

that is a Cartesian shock or something else. This is, for instance, a book that has a careful and fruitful dialogue with Merleau-Ponty in particular, but with others as well. This, in my mind, is a significant model of constructive inter-cultural thinking, one in which comparison enriches both traditions.

So, I come to this book with a great deal of respect and admiration. The questions I have, therefore, are not ones that are meant to challenge fundamental aspects of the project. They are, rather, questions meant to examine methodological decisions Ram-Prasad makes in the book and continue the positive energy I see here.

My central focus here will be on what Ram-Prasad calls “ecological phenomenology” (1ff) and how it relates to cultural texts. Phenomenology can refer to many different ways of doing philosophy, perhaps surprisingly to those who think about the early Husserlian transcendental versions of it as its core. An incomplete list would include the following:

1. The transcendental approach to phenomenology (basically the early Husserl and the tradition that comes out of that) is the version most often criticized by later theorists who want to criticize phenomenology.
2. The genetic approach of the later Husserl, which is more exploratory than descriptive.
3. The hermeneutic approach of Heidegger and others, which starts from interpretation rather than description or exploration (see, for example, Heidegger 2005).²
4. The existential approach that focuses on existence in the world as a radical act of freedom.
5. The generative approach of Anthony Steinbock (1995)³ that is more focused on normative and social issues.
6. The enactive approach of figures such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Francisco Varela (2016),⁴ and Shaun Gallagher (2010),⁵ who re-introduce the empirical into phenomenology while retaining Husserl’s early critique of psychologism. These writers also introduce elements that are, at times, at odds with some fundamental aspects of other aspects of forms of phenomenology, such as its representational assumptions.
7. The “New” version phenomenology, associated with Dominique Janicaud (2005),⁶ Emmanuel Levinas (1969),⁷ Michel Henry (2015),⁸ Jean-Luc Marion (2002),⁹ and others, is oriented towards excess, the hidden, and the other.
8. And, there are the reluctant heirs of phenomenology like Henri Bergson (Kelly 2010),¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Alain Badiou (see Badiou 2000¹¹ on both Deleuze and Badiou), who take issue with some aspect of the project (e.g., its representationalism, its transcendentalism, Deleuze even calls it “our modern scholasticism,” Deleuze 2006: 195¹²) but who nevertheless use other aspects of its methodology.

The use of phenomenology in cultural contexts has been mixed, in the sense that some people have been wary about elements of the project. So for instance, Emmanuel Eze, in *On Reason* (Eze 2008¹³; see also Janz 2008¹⁴), includes elements of phenomenological method but is not interested in its “transcendental posturings” (Eze 2008: xv). Eze is writing from the point of view of one who is trying to recognize the range of kinds of reason we deploy in different contexts, while at the same time recognizing as an African the ways in which reason has been historically denied to Africans. It might be argued that he is confusing the transcendental with universalizing tendencies found in much western philosophy, and that the transcendental is merely about the conditions of experience, not about a single kind of determinative reason or experience modeled on western precedents. Like

Ram-Prasad, who is “not concerned to develop a unifying ontology of human subjectivity (or more precisely, the conditions for the possibility of subjectivity)” (16), Eze is not concerned to develop the unified standards for reason or reasoning. Some phenomenologists might want to argue that these demurrals on the part of Ram-Prasad and Eze are still disguised nods to the question of universalizing, and not really reasons for rejecting the transcendental element within phenomenology.

Both Ram-Prasad and Eze, though, engage in what I would call “thinking in place.” That is, they are both aware of the provenance of both concepts and methods. I have elsewhere argued (Janz 2015)¹⁵ that western hermeneutics is an argument not just about texts, but specific kinds of texts, with specific problematics in terms of their moral or aesthetic authority, and to miss that is to be prone to simply imposing a hermeneutics that has been worked out to answer those questions in places which never really had those questions to begin with. This does not mean that we cannot speak of hermeneutics outside of the western space of thought—much remains when the problematic is recognized as having some fundamental differences. The walls of these spaces of thought, whether they are cultural, religious, gendered, or otherwise, are not impermeable, nor are they deterministic.

This quick survey of the landscape sets us up to ask about the space that ecological phenomenology proposes to occupy. Phenomenology has, of course, been put to literal ecological uses—we can find figures in most of the flavors mentioned above who focus on ecology and environmental issues. But of course, “ecology” in Ram-Prasad’s use does not necessarily draw us to environmental questions (it is, of course, an open question as to how much his method might benefit from some of those explorations, or how much environmental questions would benefit from his approach to bodiliness in classical Indian philosophy). Rather, his work is not primarily focused on the “natural” world, whatever that means. Ecology here means something else. It is the site of creation of experience. It is a phenomenology less interested in finding the conditions for the possibility of experience, and more interested in understanding how the rich range of contexts (in particular the subtleties of bodily experience) might produce new forms of subjectivity.

The approach to the body here seems to be at the edges of what we can see as mainstream Husserlian phenomenology. Ram-Prasad says as much in his introductory chapter. “Body” is not the precondition for experience, but that which is revealed in experience, and not as a unified concept. He prefers “bodiliness” to embodiment for this reason, and sees someone like Bruno Latour as an example of how the body might be an interface “that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements” (16). It is not, therefore, simply a precondition for experience, or the fundamental aspect of experience that must be explained first in order to understand how or why experience is what it is. It is not, in that sense, transcendental, although it might still be in some other sense. It is a somewhat different approach than how I have sometimes approached the body when working in place studies, that our body is our “first place.” That fact, while it might still be true, tells us little about the variety of experience, because it remains a precondition to experience rather than something revealed through experience. The body might still be our first place, but it is a site of emergence and it is an event.

Corry Shores (2012)¹⁶ compares Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze on the body in a manner that I think is useful here. Ram-Prasad pushes back, in places, against Merleau-Ponty’s version of embodiment, while at the same time finding his work useful (see, for instance, 12-13). Shores points us toward a Deleuzian version of the body which is more interested in differentials than in simply overcoming Cartesian dualism by introducing the body as a form of knowledge. Shores points to the ways in which Deleuze’s version of the body retains ideas about rhythm and becoming (Shores 2012: 204). The body is, in other words, less a prerequisite for experience than a site of potentiality, rooted

in the rhythms of its intersection with other objects and systems while open to emergent possibilities as those complex relationships shift and change.

So, I can understand Ram-Prasad's debts to and demurrals about Merleau-Ponty. He works these out differently than someone like Deleuze, but there is at least a family resemblance. We see the specific potentialities worked out in his four case studies on bodiliness. While each case study is rich, I am interested in tracing Ram-Prasad's ecological phenomenology in this specific way, that is, in the manner that opens up spaces of meaning and potentiality. I am also interested in inquiring about his ecological phenomenology itself. It seems to me that the versions of the texts he deals with that might take us closer to Deleuze than to Merleau-Ponty, and given that there is a tense relationship between Deleuzian rhizomatic thought and at least classic versions of phenomenology, there will be a live question as to whether ecological phenomenology is a better fit for these texts than more anti-representational work.

The first case study is on the medical treatise the *Caraka Samhitā*, specifically the chapter on the Ordinary Person. Ram-Prasad points out the ways in which this chapter is more than just advice to the physician on healing, but rather takes into account the human condition itself. Medicine exists in order to make human life possible:

human agency is the very motivation for why medicine should exist. It is what the patient wants that makes for the very idea of wellbeing, and this is why the techniques of the physician are adumbrated (32).

The body is not, in other words, simply a mute symptomological text ready for interpretation, or a machine that requires fixing. But it is also not just a liberal subject, wanting to exercise its free will ("human agency" does not have that connotation here). It is, if we may be so bold, a body without organs:

The crucial tactic the text adopts is to see the *puruṣa* as both an elemental part of the bodily human being and yet also as somehow implying the self that makes that human being capable of agency and illness. The body as material object made up of constituent parts is not the main concern of the physician (except in a forensic sense that is not obvious in the *Caraka Samhitā*); it is the alleviation of suffering (35).

This body is non-dualistic, and the question of the alleviation of suffering is dependent on what Ram-Prasad calls the "vertical question": "what renders body capable of being subjective, **above** and **beyond** the elements that constitute it?" (39) This is not a request for a supernatural element, but the "explanatory limit to what renders life possible" (40).

The body might not be a mute symptomological text, but it is a text. It is the place of an epistemic meeting between doctor and patient (47). It is also embedded in a social world of others (51ff), and this too is part of its bodiliness. There are rhythms in this world, both ritualistic and mundane. This means that

what we now call 'life-style'—and not just impeccable moral guidelines—is folded into the conception of wellness, so that continual attention to the whole of our subjectivity is espoused as the model of the well life by Caraka (52).

This means that the doctor-patient interchange must also take this larger set of rhythms into account, not merely as complicating factors in a reductionist medical program, but to see the

patient's own ecology as a space of wellness. And, although Ram-Prasad does not emphasize it here, wellness must be more than just equilibrium on this model. The inner/outer state of the person, the interaction between patient and doctor, and the self in the rhythmic world are all moments of intensity, points where creative instability rather than equilibrium is what we might think of as wellness.

The second case study, on the gendered body, is from the *Mahābhārata*. Ram-Prasad focuses on the ascetic Sulabhā. She had renounced ties with the social world, and in the *Mahābhārata* her story is recounted in a series of scenes having to do with “bodily being, gender, and the content and expression of freedom” (59). These scenes give evidence of her bodily awareness, emotion, and comportment, along with her exercise of the freedom that came from renouncing the world. She hears of a king, Janaka, who has attained absolute freedom despite still being a ruler, and so goes to find out if this is true (61).

Ram-Prasad takes the figure of Sulabhā, who does not appear in the scenes, as the figure in whom we can see bodiliness. She remains mysterious in herself; the point is to focus on the scenes. In these scenes, she exhibits yogic powers by presenting herself as young and beautiful, fusing with Janaka and engaging in a set of conversations. Ram-Prasad shows her strategic responses to Janaka are her ways of retaining agency while not falling into a stifling set of social expectations of her as a woman. The interchanges allow Sulabhā to articulate a theory of the human being, with several significant characteristics:

- (i) it has a carefully detailed account of compositional nature, one which constructs the bodily human within an ecological paradigm in which different dimensions of existence and environment determine its constitution; (ii) it is in no way susceptible to a dualist construal of the human being as a mind/body entity; and (iii) the unified explanatory role attached to the ‘mind’ (as the purely non-material, cogitative unity that gives reflexive identity to each human subject) found in any Cartesian-style account is distributed over different elements of the human being: there is the ‘mind’ as the functional organ of inquiry, the ‘intellect’ as the judging faculty, and the ‘essence’ as moral-phenomenal character, while the ‘cogniser of the field’ is the term for the reflexivity that permits self-attribution (81-2).

We have the ecological phenomenology approach supported here again. We can also see this as a model close to being an enactivist account of cognition—being human is a set of systemic and complex interactions at a range of levels, it extends throughout the body, and its reflexivity suggests the enactive model of practice and rhythm preceding thought and intention. Included in this is the interpretive nature of sexuality—not fluid in the sense of arbitrary, but contingent in its social implications. The goal of the discussions is to ascertain the true nature of freedom, and she does not argue for a version that denies gender and suggests a dualism in which mind is beyond gender and body is wrapped up in it. Instead, she argues for a kind of experiential space that is free in that her bodily existence has potentialities not necessitated by the specific rhythms of society. She is a renouncer, an ascetic, one who has withdrawn from society for the purpose of contemplation. She stands in a different relationship to the narratives around her gender than others do—her asceticism opens her to gender performances that do not deny her femininity, but which show different potentialities for it. It is freedom, not restriction—some might think of a renouncer as having limited their range of freedoms, but she has made freedom possible. As Ram-Prasad says:

[I]his episode carries with it an account of the ecology as a whole: one within which a woman's experience as woman is already structured by her situation, but also one in which

her deliberate transformation of its affective powers leaves her in the position of teaching a demanding lesson in the possible transcendence of the whole phenomenological situation by all human beings (98).

The third case study focuses on contemplative practice. Ram-Prasad goes past monistic versions of contemplation to a version that has the following characteristics:

1. The practices of care of the subject, the contemplative exercises, are systematic and ecological.
2. They do not make metaphysical presuppositions about who is cared for, but simply let a view of the human emerge in the practice.
3. What emerges is the bodily subject which is at the same time dissolved out of intuitive—not metaphysically principled—binaries.
4. As the ecological practice details it, the tension between the objective and the lived (the non-phenomenological and the phenomenological) is explained (away) through (a) the constant saturation of the object of phenomenology with the entire existential range of that phenomenology; while conversely, (b) the most fine-grained reflexivity about that phenomenology shows that anything subjective can emerge as the object of principled practice. Together this amounts to the demonstration of an ecological phenomenology through contemplative practice (101).

Contemplation is often seen as an opening up to some element of the divine or ultimate reality, made possible in much western thought as the subjugation or purification of the body. The picture we get here is very different—the phenomenal body is “both the locus of livedness—a centre of subjectivity—and the object of analysis” (105). The intensity of this tension is what makes available the human—it is becoming-human. We can see this in Ram-Prasad’s answer to the question of why there is an ambiguity between the lived and objective body: “the phenomenological field allows a shifting of focus on to different interpretations of its content, varying according to intention and the salience attended to.” (107) These might not just be interpretations—they might be creative potentialities arising from the intensity of the tension. Ram-Prasad sees his ecological version of phenomenology as methodology rather than ontology, but I wonder whether it is really methodology, or rather is the recognition that the openness to the potentialities of the body are necessary for the creation of new experience and the ability to thrive as humans. Methodology suggests to me something more structured and teleological than what is described throughout this chapter.

It is clear, of course, why the connection between contemplation and methodology would be made. Contemplation is a practice, and as such can be seen as a method for achieving something. The actual practices outlined in the chapter are, in some cases, arranged in what might look like teleological stages (the “seven-fold skill in learning,” 119; the “ten-fold skill in attention,” 120), akin to something like a western *via negativa*, but Ram-Prasad’s account of contemplation does not lead us towards anything like that program of purification based in Augustinian or Neoplatonic thought. There is a flow (“we now move from Concentration [...] to Understanding,” 125), but this is not the same as a program designed to reach enlightenment by following a set of prescribed steps, even those with a wide range of variation within them (as one might see with, for example, St. John of the Cross). His account is, in other words, more interesting than the word “methodology” would suggest.

It is perhaps this chapter that most seems to stretch the resources of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, and suggests that a more useful frame would be something like enactivist cognition or Deleuzian thought. Ram-Prasad recognizes that there is not a theory of cognition in this text

(132-33), but perhaps that is not what is needed. 4E cognition's (the "e"s are embodied, embedded, extended, enactive) usual task is to account for cognitive processes, up to and including consciousness. It could, though, also be seen as an approach to thinking, that is, a space of thought which does not start from representational assumptions, teleological imperatives, or positivist approaches to causal explanations, and which is open to questions of how to cope in reality characterized by particular forms of uncertainty about emergent systems and our place in that complex space. This starting point need not only be directed at accounts of cognition *per se*—some of my own recent work, for instance, proposes an enactivist account of African philosophy that attempts to move away from its pervasive representationalist history towards a new space of thought, without necessarily thinking that this needs to come with a specific account of cognition (Janz 2018).¹⁷

Even though Buddhaghosa's system might not be a Buddhist account of cognition, then, it may be a space of thought, and indeed, that is what Ram-Prasad seems to be describing here. There is in fact an enactivist aspect in the descriptions of cognition—it is not a matter of first getting concepts straight, which will then lead to right action, but rather bodily practice and thought are wrapped up together:

[...] there is a proliferation of complexity—a foliation of types of cognition—along the sensory stems. The Sensory leads us back to somatic formations (*rūpas*)—eye, ear, nose, tongue, bodily touch—and we can see how the analytic distinction apparent in classifying these two aggregates separately does not in fact encode a dualism of body and mind at all (nor of course, reducing 'mind' to 'body' in a monotonic physicalism). Instead, they become different aspects of how the human being experiences himself (in the person of the monk) (136).

Not only is there not dualism here, there is also not an ascent towards a purity that leaves the material behind. And, furthermore, there seems to be more than just the double-sidedness of phenomenology at work. Ram-Prasad suggests as much, when he talks about the Buddhaghosa's approach as going beyond Foucault's opposition of the knowledge of the self and the knowledge of nature. There is, as he says, "no binary divide between a subject and a world that is bridged through a body that partakes of both (as we find in Merleau-Ponty's 'lived body'). Or perhaps we should say, there is no concern for the possibility of such a divide and the need to bridge it" (140). This is true, but one conclusion might be that the analysis of the constitution of what is available in experience is happening in the face of the recognition of uncertainty—not the uncertainty of our own finite knowledge but the uncertainty of the emergent nature of reality, including our own reality.

I reiterate that I come to this text as one who is not an expert in classical Indian philosophy. I am not, in other words, trying to suggest a better interpretation of texts that I am not an expert in. What I am doing is to take the evidence as presented by Ram-Prasad and extend his analysis to a place that he spends less time exploring. That place is the point at which phenomenology's own resources are pushed to their limit. He acknowledges that such a place exists—that is his point in talking about ecological phenomenology and in seeing the limits in Merleau-Ponty's approach. I am simply trying to add to the sense of what might be beyond phenomenology's usual resources.

If we approach these texts from the point of view of one who is trying to decide what forms of expertise, ability, affect, and bodiliness are required in order to move forward in an uncertain world (which I take to be an aspect of cognition), then the inherent representationalism of phenomenology might stand in its way of usefulness. The one who is trying to decide how to move

forward might not be looking for description, explanation, or interpretation, but something else, something closer to *poiesis*.

This is a possible reading of the three types of cognition: “good (*kusala*), bad (*akusala*), and indeterminate (*abyākata*)” (133). Ram-Prasad unpacks the third category, which for my argument is useful because that is going to be the space of uncertainty. The question, then, is this: what is the purpose of the elaborate tree (134) that outlines the indeterminate forms of cognition? Is this a taxonomy of that indeterminacy, and if so, is this an attempt to reduce indeterminacy to something that can be dealt with using existing tools of thought?

The indeterminate cognition is the locus of attentive practice, and contains two branches—a productive and a performative branch. The account here is rich, and describes cognition that brings together somatic, affective, emotional, and intellectual aspects of being human. It is “cognition in the making,” (136) and is the space where Ram-Prasad would like us to see ecological phenomenology at work. His argument for the avoidance of dualisms between mind and body, between subject and world, are persuasive, but more than that, there is a door opened to the creation of the self as a part of an emergent social and physical world.

The fourth and final case study concerns love. Ram-Prasad presents a novel reading of Canto XVIII of the twelfth-century *Naiṣadharita*. His “ecological phenomenology of the erotic” (143) takes us beyond questions of desire and fulfillment, beyond sexuality as something located in the body and interpreted by the mind. This erotic phenomenology is described in the story of Nala and Damayantī. Ram-Prasad, after recounting the complicated tale of their relationship, brings out the phenomenological aspects:

Ecological phenomenology shares the same metaphor-laden intuition as these earlier insights [of Luce Irigaray], but it also seeks to develop a more fine-grained account of the ways in which this situated subjectivity, and the analysis of ‘landscape’ work together, because it holds that the importance of the ecological landscape lies in contextuality and not in a post-dualist metaphysics of ‘man’ and his ‘materialization of subjectivity’. It conceives subjectivity as formed in the contextual totality of experiences (154).

The goal, in other words, is to demonstrate that the erotics at work here is not just reducible to materiality but is an interplay of experiences that form subjectivity. This formation of subjectivity “is determined by a dynamic range of functions and connections, whose totality is given only by a specific context (and therefore varies between contexts)” (154). This version of erotic is not simply the pursuit of a beloved by a lover, the desire for someone that is ultimately fulfilled in intimacy. Neither is it the divine erotics in western mysticism, in which the beloved is loved because he or she is an image of God, and through the love one comes to know and love God, thus releasing one’s own true self. Ram-Prasad analyzes the multi-sensory engagements that underlie the erotics within the Nala and Damayantī story, to show the complex reciprocity (and in some cases, a-reciprocity) in lovemaking that is a kind of questioning of the self. The story is full of identities both concealed and revealed, ones which layer different kinds of meaning onto sensory engagement.

The account given is phenomenological, certainly, even hermeneutic at times, as the textuality of the other is at stake. But it seems like more than that as well. The erotic is an intensity, a height of desire and tension which is not necessarily brought to completion. It is not desire as a lack, which seeks and finds fulfillment in the other. It is a visceral, multisensory encounter with the other in which the emergence of the subject happens in the intensity of the interchanges under a wide variety of conditions, of knowledge states, and of social contexts. The world becomes a world through their relationship, even as their relationship assumes a world. This version of erotics plays

with borders and boundaries, between bodies, customs, and worlds. Ram-Prasad sums it up toward the end of the chapter:

So our subjectivity in romantic love is one where our bodiliness is felt as a bounded and pre-given presence uniquely available to us, that has now been shaped afresh in critical ways (that will become evident only through the narrative of our lives). This re-constitution is not a loss of an originary sense of self but of changes to it, across different dimensions of subjectivity: which dimensions they are will depend upon the contingencies of who one is and who exactly the lover. The changes will concern the way one makes judgements, responds to favourite songs, handles the demands of work, views one's physical makeup, takes a particular moral course, and so on. This making afresh happens critically through lovemaking, when the whole range of what I call the organs of subjectivity form the limit with those of the other. Bodiliness then feels at its limit, neither in its pre-given stability nor in its future trajectory, but now—in the state where both human beings begin and end simultaneously (181).

There is, in other words, an emergent self, a subject whose potentiality exists only in the actions of the erotic. Meanings are established, yes, but more than that a life can be set on a trajectory wholly unanticipated. This is not simply a romantic rhapsody about the magic of love; it is a concrete example of the ways in which the interplay of complex systems in life make available potentialities of the self that we cannot anticipate.

It is clear, I hope, that I am in broad agreement with Ram-Prasad's project here. Indeed, it is very exciting to see these classic texts engaged with a keen analytic eye, in order to see what is already there—a nuanced approach to bodiliness, cognition, and action. He establishes very well that we are not working in a post-Cartesian space, and that this western form of dualism does not help to understand these texts, even as an echo or trace. My goal in this set of reflections has been to suggest another perspective made available by his approach to bodiliness that might add elements that classical phenomenology does not.

Ram-Prasad sums up the unifying themes of the book with three statements. I think he has, in fact, done more than these statements suggest. They are as follows, with my comments:

- (i) Body as a philosophical category is integral to the sustained study of experience (184).

Yes, certainly that, at the very least. More, though—the body is a site of creation, perhaps *the* site of creation, which is to say that its particularity necessitates the emergence of meanings within a range of inter-related spheres, not all of which are in the control of the person. The body surprises as well as acts. Contemplation does not just purify, it opens the self to potentialities of the self not apparent when we imagine that we are on a path to holiness or some such thing.

- (ii) At the same time, it must always be clear that the understanding of body is contingent upon the context of and motivation for study (184).

This is the issue of questioning, which was briefly touched up in passing. There is questioning in the medical arena, not just of symptoms but of the self. In a more modern setting, we might think in terms of the questioning of positivist approaches to causation which reject conditioning factors in their search for the simplest possible explanation for things. It is “lovemaking as questioning oneself” (169), the intensity produced in the erotic that actualizes virtualizations of the self

unavailable in other ways. So, yes, understanding the body is contingent on the context and motivation of the study—that too is an intensity. The context and motivation make available some questions, and obscure others, and in so doing create a space of thought. Ram-Prasad has demonstrated how this works elegantly, and what he shows us has implications far beyond the reading of these texts.

- (iii) Such understanding requires an account of “bodiliness”—the human being as that which is a subject through and as “body”—in terms of the interactive relationships between a dynamic range of contextualizing aspects of the world of the subject (185).

Again, yes, and in fact, in my opinion this pushes us to the edge of phenomenology’s set of tools, and towards those made available by Deleuze and others. The “interactive relationships between a dynamic range of contextualizing aspects” do not need to be seen as layers of interpretation, they can be seen as intensities, as creative moments. Phenomenology is still possible, but only as a backward glance. Creation moves into the future, and I think Ram-Prasad has given us an eloquent and detailed look at how these classical Indian texts reflect a vital life.

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Tracing the Contours of Bodiliness in Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad's *Human Being, Bodily Being*

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What is phenomenology when it is neither bound by nor is responsive to the metaphysical dualism that is Descartes' legacy? Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad's *Human Being, Bodily Being* traces a path for phenomenology that is unencumbered by the lasting metaphysical puzzle of the mind-body split. On this view, human experience is disclosed through "bodily being"—the dynamic range of bodily modes that are constituted and re-constituted through the subject's experience of and with the world. The qualities of human bodiliness are always in flux, shaped by the specificities of how we attend to what is in our midst; bodiliness shows itself in myriad instantiations as always integral to any experience but nonetheless never quite the same across varying experiences. The phenomenology that results from this approach to bodiliness is distinct from classical European Phenomenology; it is what Ram-Prasad calls an "ecological phenomenology" that views the nature of the body and its boundaries as un-fixed, always in motion, always re-configuring themselves in interrelationship with their context.

Ram-Prasad credits the metaphor of ecology as a descriptor for this non-ontological phenomenological method to his collaborative work with Maria Heim.¹ Ecology in general refers to the dynamism, interdependence, and interrelation of a holistic situation. In ecology, the aim is not to render an organism clear and distinct as an individual; rather, an organism is understood by way of its continuity with a larger, dynamic context, the holistic life of which constitutes that organism as such. It is only through understanding an organism's relation to its context that it can be understood at all. Ecological phenomenology likewise relies upon understanding the context of human experience and our interrelationship with that context as necessary constituents of the "bodily being" that is so fundamental to the human event. Overall, ecological phenomenology shows that human subjectivity always "shows up" in relation to the "infinite nodes of an ecology of being" (184), with a vast array of saliences and shifting boundaries of the subject that will show themselves uniquely in each of these nodes of ecological being. This ecological paradigm for investigating the human takes bodiliness as the general starting point of human experience, which neither implies an ontology of consciousness nor of materiality per se. Ram-Prasad's analysis outlines how the contours of bodiliness shift and transform according to the motivation and orientation through which it is interrogated, the areas of expertise that the interrogation invokes, and the particular descriptive tools that it deploys in that investigative context.

As Ram-Prasad himself notes, this methodology of ecological phenomenology is refreshingly unencumbered by the legacy of Cartesian dualism and the traditional conceptual frameworks that govern European Phenomenology. As such, it is phenomenology "with a lowercase p"—as opposed to the historically specific disciplinary program of twentieth-century European Phenomenology. Ram-Prasad takes up phenomenology without being bound by the strictures of classical European Phenomenology, which he argues is still haunted by the ghost of Descartes even (or especially) when claiming to be repudiating him, therefore still remaining bound to the terms of that dualism even in the attempt to overcome it.² By contrast, we find through the ecological-phenomenological method that nailing down a determinate theory of the metaphysical categories that come to bear within bodiliness is not the only meaningful or illuminating approach to understanding human experience. Indeed, this ecological-phenomenological analysis shows that in the very flux of the nature of bodily being—in the resistance of bodily being to the fixed categories that the Cartesian shock has left us

with—is a meaningfully open and dynamic view of the human. This is a refreshingly unfussy approach to phenomenology, recasting the nature of phenomenological reflection itself as an answer to the simple question “*how can we give an account of the human?*” that is not bound to ontology as the sole route by which that question can be addressed.

Ram-Prasad’s survey of four classical Indian texts—each offering its own rendition of ecological phenomenology—convincingly demonstrates the dynamism of this view of bodiliness, while the dazzling range of the literary genres that comprise the survey showcases the depth and breadth of classical Indian thought. His four case studies deal with classical Indian medicine in the āyurvedic text, the *Caraka Saṃhitā*; the experience of gendered bodies in a passage from the *Mahābhārata*; body-centered practices in Buddhaghosa’s Theravāda Buddhist text, the *Visuddhimagga*; and the bodiliness of lovemaking in the erotic poetry of Śrī Harṣa’s *Naiṣadharita*. The insights that Ram-Prasad gleans from them are of interest not only to those theorists invested in South Asian area studies or Indian philosophy; they offer illuminating perspectives and resources that stand to enrich the work of many disciplines and subdisciplines throughout the humanities, including phenomenology, cross-cultural philosophy, comparative literature, gender studies, philosophy of medicine, and Buddhist studies.

Ram-Prasad writes that ecological phenomenology can serve as “a suggestive framework for the deep and occasionally implicit perspectives toward bodiliness” (22), and it is the “occasionally implicit” quality of these perspectives that are part of what makes this book such a rewarding read. Ram-Prasad never relies upon a text to explicitly elucidate a theory of the human or the body. These are not primarily, in fact, theoretical works expounding upon the structure of human experience or on the nature of the body per se, and searching for transcendental or ontological accounts of subjectivity is precisely what Ram-Prasad claims is not necessary for giving a meaningful account of human experience. Instead he interrogates his four primary texts simply to uncover the role of the body in each text and the particularities of the bodily experience that each of them recounts. The answer to which he arrives with each of his four resources highlights the productivity of the ecological-phenomenological method for reading what is implicit in a text and the ways in which it can be obliquely revealing of the nature of human bodiliness. In using a flexible and open-ended principle of inclusion in determining what texts can be “counted” as ecological-phenomenological sources, he considerably expands the potential resources for the theorist interested in giving an account of human experience while also challenging traditional notions of “who or what” is doing phenomenology. The most salutary ramification of thinking the body in this ecological register is the openness of the terms through which we can see bodiliness manifesting and re-manifesting in such a variety of contexts.

For example, in the third of his case studies, Ram-Prasad offers an illuminating reading of Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (fifth century CE), a Buddhist meditation manual that systematizes the Theravāda Buddhist path of practice. The text moves through successive stages of the purification of the mind, from establishing discipline through the attainment of enlightenment, offering detailed practice instructions for working through each such stage of purification. Ram-Prasad’s analysis gives an ecological-phenomenological reading of a few of the practices contained therein, which include meditating upon the foulness of corpses; meditating upon the practitioner’s own lived body and its anatomy, including its repulsive qualities; cultivating awareness of one’s own momentary experience through meditation on the breath; and analyzing the psycho-physical constituents of experience. He reads these practices as examples of “care of the self” (in the style of Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault) that are deeply phenomenological, even referring to them as “disciplined phenomenological practice” (100). These practices de-totalize the practitioner’s relationship to their body, demonstrating that the body and their experience of it are always provisional, open,

constituted by the ways that it shows up in experience, and even potentially re-constituted by the ways the practitioner adopts novel modes of attending to it in contemplative practice. That is, the outcome of these practices of attending to one's experience of bodiliness in different ways is that "certain compelling categorical distinctions about objects and subjectivity with which we [...] set forth are dissolved" (101). The efficacy of these practices hinges upon the practitioner's ability to take up aspects of the body (one's own, others' bodies, or abstractions of "body" in general) as objects of attentiveness, thereby eliciting visceral, habitual responses to them, and then using the imagination or powers of analysis to shift the lived significance of those aspects of the body. Read in this way, practices such as these are a "phenomenological method all the way down" (101) and show the duality of subject and object to be untenable, as the practitioner's own reflexive relationship to the body and the nature of the body itself prove fungible. What had once—conventionally, instinctively—been considered "subjective" becomes instead an object, and what was considered objective, inert, or "other" can become integrated as part of the subject.

Fundamentally, from a Buddhist soteriological standpoint, what is at stake in these practices is liberation from the fixed view of the self as an intrinsically "real," metaphysically subsistent entity. By using the power of attentiveness to re-shape our relationship with the body, these practices help to dislodge the practitioner from the spiritually infelicitous assumption of a fixed, essentialized reality to subjectivity. Viewed from the standpoint of ecological phenomenology, the skillfulness of these practices rests upon the basic fact of human bodiliness *as* ecologically-constituted—relational, shifting, always getting reworked according to the context and focus of our analysis. The terms of human experience (and therefore our bodily being) themselves are never fixed or in any ultimate sense "clear and distinct," and there is in fact soteriological weight to practices that help us realize this.

Buddhaghosa's practices of introducing a sense of mutability and revisability to the boundaries of subject and object are fundamentally soteriological, therefore. Buddhaghosa is concerned with guiding the practitioner into a more intimate, revelatory relationship with the dynamic qualities of bodiliness, not with expounding a precise theory of the subject. This is why Ram-Prasad claims that "Buddhaghosa does not engage in epistemology for it plays no role in the purificatory path to Buddhist perfection" (106). Later, he makes a related point that Buddhaghosa's project lacks "any metaphysical requirement" and that "his concern to attend to the analysis of experience is for the purpose of clarifying it so that the monk may be freed from the misunderstandings about his own life that keep him entangled in the painful conditions of that life" (107). In this respect, Ram-Prasad argues that Buddhaghosa "does not share the metaphysical teleology of much modern Phenomenology" (107).

While I fundamentally agree with these claims about the scope and focus of Buddhaghosa's text, they do underscore a curious feature of this particular approach to phenomenology. What most distinguishes ecological phenomenology from European Phenomenology is that ecological phenomenology is not fixated upon the metaphysical categories of subject and object (nor is it fixated upon a project of dispelling them). Nonetheless, they still draw from traditions that, to greater or lesser degrees, come equipped with well-articulated metaphysical commitments that underwrite their accounts of bodiliness. Of course, Ram-Prasad readily acknowledges as much in his introduction, where he notes, "At no point do I want to claim that there can be no ontological enterprise, let alone that metaphysics as a whole is illegitimate; after all, the most famous and celebrated systems of philosophical thought in classical India are metaphysical through and through" (24). Rather, here he states that his primary aim in the book is to expand the range of textual resources available to the phenomenologist, and, secondly, to "demonstrate the productivity of reading subjectivity (specifically bodiliness) through a non-ontological methodology of fine-grained,

analytic phenomenological description” (24). He certainly accomplishes this across his four case studies, but nonetheless, the bracketing of metaphysics from classical Indian phenomenology as extraneous to the descriptions rendered therein is a claim that stands in tension with the centrality of metaphysics that in fact motivates or otherwise orients some of the descriptions themselves.

Take Buddhaghosa once more, for example. Buddhaghosa’s methodology is not ontological because it doesn’t *need* to be; the very tradition of which he is an exponent has already taken up the Buddha’s metaphysical account of no-self (Pāli: *anattā*) and interdependent arising (Pāli: *paṭiccasamuppāda*). This metaphysics goes hand in hand with the epistemological, ethically minded exhortation that, in order for the practitioner to relieve her suffering, she must free herself from her own ignorance, the most primary manifestation of which is her clinging to a substantial self where there is not one. In that sense, it may be more accurate to say that Buddhist metaphysics is already the lodestone of this Buddhist practice. Here the metaphysics of no-self is a doxographical matter that serves as the undercarriage to Buddhaghosa’s practice instructions, so it need not be the focus of any philosophical exegesis or defense. While the attitudes toward bodiliness that we can mine in classical Indian texts are indeed occasionally implicit, perhaps metaphysical commitments may also be implicit therein as well. At least in the case of Buddhaghosa, a fine-grained description of bodily experience ultimately serves as an experiential tool for realizing the Buddhist metaphysical point of no-self.

Nonetheless, what the deeply descriptive accounts of bodily being in Buddhaghosa’s text demonstrate is that, although intellectual arguments about the metaphysics of the subject are not wholly irrelevant to a practitioner’s liberation, they do not accomplish that liberation in and of themselves. Instead, what is required is the kind of intimate examination that allows the practitioner to integrate these Buddhist philosophical principles at a deep, intra-personal level, which the ecological-phenomenological method illuminates so well. These practices that lead the practitioner toward an ecological experience of no-self are what make the difference between “knowing” the doctrine of no-self and “realizing” the significance behind that teaching by restructuring (or de-structuring) one’s experience of self, body, and relationship with the world to accommodate and integrate that teaching. It seems to me that this ecological-phenomenological account does not displace but rather complements the metaphysics that may be embedded in the traditions from which they are drawn. The view of ecological phenomenology therefore offers a different approach to understanding human experience through the intimacy of fine-grained, intra-personal attunement and description that neither hinges upon nor explicitly discounts ontological questions as potentially relevant tools for attaining a more veridical and therefore liberating understanding of human experience. By elaborating ecological phenomenology in this way, Ram-Prasad broadens the terms through which we can consider the nature of human experience by challenging the narrow ontology that hems in so much of our discussion of it.

Beyond the value of its articulation of ecological phenomenology, another remarkable achievement of *Human Being, Bodily Being* is its metaphilosophical, academic-political significance. This book is a welcome addition to the growing body of innovative work that thinks across philosophical cultures and traditions in ways that push the boundaries of how we define philosophy and philosophical thinking. Historically, much of the philosophical work on Asian materials has been largely curatorial, performing prodigious exegesis that elucidates the significance of the text as faithfully as possible. On other occasions, we find comparative philosophical work that seeks to bring Asian philosophy “into conversation” with western philosophy in a way that either holds them at odds with one another as paradigmatically incommensurable or (more often, I think) conflates them unduly, filing them as an iteration of a western philosophical school and eliding their textual specificity and the points of irreducible contrast that these traditions pose to one another. It also

bears mentioning that philosophers that work on Asian materials are almost always contributors to panels or publications dedicated to Asian philosophy—niche specialists on the periphery of our professional spaces. This state of affairs is telling of the way that Asian philosophy continues to be provincialized as such—as *Asian* philosophy and not quite considered philosophy simpliciter.

In many ways, *Human Being, Bodily Being* counters these tendencies that hold our field back. It does not fetishize Indian thought as utterly “Other” to western thought, nor does it argue that the insights from these Indian texts turn out to replicate views or concepts from western philosophy. In each chapter Ram-Prasad does point out how his case studies speak to similar lines of questioning in western thought and takes these case study texts seriously as productive and insightful phenomenological interlocutors for western theorists. He does point out a particular historical contingency—the shadow of Descartes in Europe and the lack thereof in classical India—that can account for important differences between the approaches of European Phenomenology and ecological phenomenology. Rather than being hobbled by these historical and conceptual differences, however, Ram-Prasad actually makes these distinctions enriching and productive. He does not hesitate to simply *do* philosophy with a range of texts and thinkers, both Asian and western, and thereby offers us a very good example of what philosophy can *be* when we are not fretting unduly about *where* the text came from but rather concern ourselves with *what* the text can *do*. This approach to cross-cultural philosophy reminds me of Nietzsche’s admonition in the *Gay Science* that we should ask of books not just whether they can walk but also if they can *dance* (1974, section 366).³ This, to me, seems to be the unifying rationale for how we must read cross-culturally: not only as a rote exercise of “inclusion” but simply because being well-read across traditions brings into our midst a more efficacious and illuminating set of ideas and approaches to the philosophical problems that vex us. There is something enormously refreshing about an approach to cross-cultural philosophy that bypasses the arguments of whether or in what sense Indian thought is philosophical and simply uses it to do philosophy—implicitly proving that there is indeed philosophy beyond the borders of Europe and North America and that such work can, in fact, dance—and dance *well*.

This book therefore arrives at a ripe moment for our profession and for philosophers’ contemplation of the place in it for traditions that do not count Plato or Kant as their forebears. More and more, academic philosophy is being “put on the spot” regarding its whiteness and Eurocentrism.⁴ Arguments to “expand the canon” rightly point out the racist and colonialist undertones (or overtones) of how the boundaries of philosophy are policed. In a way, Ram-Prasad’s methodology harmonizes with those arguments, but it also seems to bypass them altogether. By advancing a reading of non-ontological phenomenology rooted in Indian texts, Ram-Prasad simply dives into the phenomenological import of Indian material without much fuss or fanfare. We do not see him belaboring cross-cultural philosophical apologetics at length, arguing *why* this *āyurveda* text, or the *Mahābhārata*, or the *Visuddhimagga*, or Indian poetry should begin to “count” to philosophers as “philosophically relevant.” He simply takes them up as such and demonstrates precisely what makes them rich and relevant resources for the theorist who is concerned with generating a detailed, analytical description of human experience and bodiliness. This serves as a notable example of the rigor and richness that follow from drawing upon a diversity of textual sources on the model of what Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad has done in *Human Being, Bodily Being*.

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- ¹ See Heim and Ram-Prasad (2018) as well as Heim’s most recent work on Buddhaghosa (Heim 2018). Maria Heim, and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, “In a Double Way: *Nāmarūpa* in Buddhaghosa’s Phenomenology,” *Philosophy East and West* 68, no. 4, (2018): 1085–115. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2018.0098>; Maria Heim, *Voice of the Buddha: Buddhaghosa on the Immeasurable Words* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- ² “The Western tradition of Phenomenology, amongst other features of its post-Cartesian investigation, notices the peculiarity of the body in the subject-object relationship: it appears to be both object of subjectivity and, as ‘lived body’, the means by which there is a relationship between subject and its objects. Consequently, there is a recognition that body needs to become the bridge across the divide that Descartes had opened up between subject and object. This is an intrinsic feature of the transcendental project of phenomenology, wherein a final account—an ontology—is sought by which the rupture may be healed” (Ram-Prasad 2018: 20).
- ³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, first edition (New York: Vintage, 1974).
- ⁴ See Jay Garfield and Bryan Van Norden’s viral editorial in the *New York Times*’ column, the Stone (2016), as well as Van Norden’s follow-up to it, *Taking Back Philosophy* (2017). Together they argue that academic philosophy must either acknowledge the presence and value of philosophical traditions outside of Europe and North America or to begin to call itself what is really is: European and North American Area Studies. See: Jay L Garfield, and Bryan Van Norden, “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is.” *New York Times*, May 11, 2016; Bryan W. Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

Eastern Philosophies, Western Feminist Phenomenologies, and Ancient Cathartic Practices

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Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad offers a lucid phenomenological exploration of the nature and role of the body in experience through a study of Indian philosophical traditions. In engaging with these traditions, he finds a path around the Cartesian mind/body trap that has snagged western thought for centuries in various metaphysical enterprises with fruitless searches for a way out. Indeed, metaphysics as an endeavor, he provocatively suggests, turns on a sleight of hand, a magic trick, more superstition and sophistry, I gather, than path of enlightenment—a turn of thought that begins with the faulty premise that one might separate illusion from reality. Husserl, for example, gets caught in the metaphysical trap when he hitches his phenomenological method to the bracketing of the world. Ram-Prasad is guided instead by those phenomenologists who come after Husserl—Merleau-Ponty and presumably Heidegger—who free themselves from this bracketing, and begin their thought from immersion in the world. In his shedding of the trappings of western metaphysics, Merleau-Ponty is a constant fellow-traveler, though finally more side-kick than muse, or so I gather. For as Ram-Prasad persuasively argues, Merleau-Ponty is not finally able to shed the old skin of metaphysics but remains stuck in it. Like the tar baby, once he touches Cartesianism, his efforts to outthink the mind/body trap entangle him ever deeper in it. Even Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh is emmeshed in the dualism he tries to think his way out of, projecting a bodily trope onto the world instead of taking off from an immersion in the world. Ram-Prasad's approach draws not from the metaphysics but from the method of phenomenology just sufficiently to guide modern western readers along an alternative route for grasping experience. This route allows for such analytic guideposts as body and mind but as components of a more holistic experience, one that is brought out in what he, along with Maria Heim, terms an "ecological phenomenology." The result is not only a rich intellectual pleasure but a substantial and very important exemplar of how to think otherwise about the nature and role of bodiliness in human experience.

Ram-Prasad's conclusion gives us a thread into his nuanced thought. I would like to quote directly from there beginning with a bold parenthetical remark that refers again to his book's departure from classical phenomenology: "It would take another, more perilous undertaking to defend this contention, but I may as well say for heuristic purposes that this is the opposite of traditional bracketing: it is not that the world is left out in order to pursue the subject but that it is in going out to the world that the subject is found. And the living body is not the pre-given spark for an ontological mystery but the contingent description arrived at after a phenomenological *quest*" (184, emphasis mine). This remark not only underscores his distinct departure point but also signals in passing what I find intriguing as a tacit feature of his ecological approach: that his undertaking is in many ways a quest, or otherwise what in literary terms marks a genre classified as the epic (or sometimes, romance): it is high adventure with adversaries, heroic men and women, mystery, and an epic arc—not just an arc stretched vertically through time but also geographically across the east/west divide. The philosopher as adventurer takes his western ingenuity, shaped by the phenomenological tool-box, but without the western tradition's ontological baggage, thus jettisoning all those metaphysical puzzles that would suck him back into Cartesian dualisms. Then he brings his readers into a new world, one of mystery and enchantment. I draw on Ram-Prasad's parenthetical allusion to a literary genre, the quest and its perilous undertaking, its venture out into the world, because his use of the phenomenological method is too supple and nuanced, too inflected by what it

embraces for study, to reduce it to straight philosophy—caught up as it is, as he insistently and persuasively argues, in redressing the Cartesian mind/body trap, a trap that his own ecological phenomenology allows him to deftly avoid.

Quests bring back some treasure—think of the mythic quest for the golden fleece, the epic Homeric search for home, the *Gilgamesh*'s warning against hubris—along a path with multiple journeys, with seductions as well as adventures, the promise of the end of social division and war, the defeat of a monster, the conflicting drives for pleasure and power, and the tragedies of hubris, along with typical elements of an adversary's defeat and the return of rightful rule—these quest themes subtly play under the philosophical argument of the book, like the Hindu epic *The Mahābhārata* (together with the entire *Bhagavad Gita*). The epic subtext lends the book aspects of a panoramic view of everything, less a theory than a path of amplified awareness, which traverses erotic play, ethics, gender relationships, and spirituality. And like the Hindu epic that it features, its rich resonances and overtones lend force to the ultimate harmonic vision that the book glimpses. Once more, I quote from the end: “If humanity is indeed indivisible (as Mahatma Gandhi put it), then questions about what humans are should be communicable, interpretable, and understandable conceptually across the specific cultural boundaries that the contingencies of history have thrown up” (185). And indeed, as is said about epics like the *Mahābhārata*, this ecological phenomenology promises to bring out the harmonies underlying a true culture, glimpses into what might offer some respite from the disorders of modern life.

Some phenomenologists might find in Merleau-Ponty, or even in others whom he brings along on his adventure (perhaps Irigaray), more resources for overcoming classic Cartesian dualisms. Still other readers might more rigorously defend metaphysics, including the ontological investigations of the self that he also detours around. However, I find his line of thought highly convincing and both seminal and suggestive, and am interested primarily in seeing it developed even further in future projects. Metaphysics does indeed seem to reify through its dualist frames concepts that lock us into useless abstractions. For sure, his book nicely strengthens efforts to find wisdom and insight beyond sterile puzzles as it turns to concrete yet often transcendent life experiences.

My questions come from joining in the books four journeys, its four *topoi*—medicine, asceticism through the lens of gender, contemplation, and eros—to pull out yet another thread, one I hope could offer yet another dimension for an ecological phenomenology. Each of the four chapters emphasizes a bodily existence given through the experience of a world, rather than through a mind that represents the body to itself as though it were an object. However, only in a peripheral way, understandably given the bodily focus, do the chapters bring in the communal—its structures, its politics, and the social emotions (say, of joy) that sustain it.

My questions begin by returning to yet another problematic axis of western thought: the individual vs. the social or communal. In western philosophy, this dualism arises along the axis of individual autonomy, with related conceptions of negative and positive freedom on the one end, and the collective and communal on the other. My central question is, how might an ecological phenomenology be developed in a study that focused on this western divide to bring forward the importance of the communal for the four *topoi* that the book lands on? My own perspective owes much to recent feminist and intersectional theorists' attention to the self as porous, vulnerable, and, to be sure, fundamentally not separate or separable from the world, a world where conflict and strife have difficulty finding moments of reconciliation and harmonic resonance, even as they achingly reach for them. And while I too argue for moments of epic vision, my questions draw less from the major motifs of quest narratives and epic romances than from comic and tragic theater for both the irony and the cathartic wisdom they embrace.

Let's begin with chapter 1 on medicine. Ram-Prasad examines the *Caraka Samhitā*, which is a medical compendium and a sacred text in the knowledge of health. His main contention is that this book introduces both expert and patient as agents in an intersubjective relationship, pointing towards a holistic approach to medicine. In contrast with modern western medicine's narrow focus on an isolated ailment or a single organ or areas of the body, this medical text expands to treat the healthy life, which concerns the whole person. Two key quotes stand out: "The fact that the text is framed as being concerned with longevity—and not immortality or ultimate freedom—immediately orients us to the bodily nature of its human subject, for by longevity is meant the flourishing of the living body" (28). "While the text speaks primarily in the voice of the physician attending to a patient, it also frequently shifts register to see the world in terms of a subjectivity common to persons on either side of medical practice. As such, it is helpful for our purposes to begin with an awareness of the weight it gives to human agency. It takes the aims of life as being shared by all human subjects, practitioners, patients, and healthy people" (29).

My first question is how these ancient, holistic, and as I understand from his discussion of this text, elite medical and therapeutic practices for healing and sustaining a long life compare with other ancient therapeutic practices that seem to root the individual and their possibilities for flourishing organically in the communal and collective. That is, beyond the patient-doctor dyad, I wonder about the role of the communal or collective for individual flourishing. Greek tragic theater (with its dance and musical choruses) and its more popular appeal seems to have dealt with individual ailments not through medical experts or individual therapies for the elite but through collective rituals that required the participation of the community. Western philosophers since Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics have gradually set aside those more ancient cathartic practices, and in this way began the separation of the individual and their pursuit of wellbeing from that of the community, a separation that culminates in modern individualism and alienation. The stern and theory-oriented dialogues of Plato threaten to banish theater (dance/music/chorus) and its rituals, offering instead mental exercises for the individual mind. For example, Diotima leads Socrates on an individual quest and dialectic, rather than a collective and thus truly holistic process for gaining insight and healing. He substitutes theory for theater. And thus, Plato separates the philosopher initiate from the *hoi polloi*, the larger group that might have experienced healing practices in common rituals. Even Aristotle, who defends the value of theater and its methods of healing hardly touches on its organic connection to common ritual. More recently, medical experts attempting to help those who suffer from trauma are again drawing on the therapeutic value of art and meaning-making experiences as performed in collective exercises, not just individual ones. My first question concerns this: what is the relation between the *Caraka Samhitā* and more common practices of healing? Were there practices that tied individuals and their relationships into larger communities, with their often troubled histories and epic traumas—traumas that reveal deep divisions, perhaps even within families, but also as they reverberate across tribal, racial, ethnic, or other divides? A major contemporary example might be found in Toni Morrison's depiction in her novel *Beloved* of the generational traumas from the middle passage and slavery, and the way these psychic but also necessarily social traumas continue to haunt the landscape and enfold the private and the individual into a larger common struggle.¹ Drawing upon the resonances between ancient Greek theater's chorus and their warnings against the hubris of the entitled and the ethics of the communal in Africana culture, Morrison's novels recall the cathartic possibilities of collective storytelling, and of engulfing rhythms and harmonies, and of communal spiritual practices through dance and music. Could these practices add yet another layer for phenomenological inquiry into a more holistic experience of health and healing? Is there an undercurrent of elitism in the selected text that, however inadvertently, underplays the role of the common?

The second chapter turns to ascetic practices, and in particular to the path of the ascetic Sulabhā, who is featured in the *Mahābhārata*, where “we see a subtle and sympathetic rendition of the condition under which the human being who is a woman responds radically to finding her bodiliness already determined for her” (58). Ram-Prasad sees in this exemplary figure a woman who uses her training and discipline to renounce material wealth, status, power, and a shared household in favor of a higher and transcendent freedom. In this part of the great epic, she is seen using her debate skills to challenge a king whom Ram-Prasad describes as an archetypal male, one who fails to find true liberation from entanglement in worldly pursuits. He describes her as a woman who is aware of her bodiliness and thus her gender, and who does not aim to find liberation by abstracting from it, as do early modern feminists who have inherited the Cartesian legacy of mind/body dualism. This woman thinks through her embodied self as part of her composite being, and yet does so in such a way as to exemplify true freedom from materiality, rather than either immersion in it or abstraction from it. Thus, in contrast with liberal enlightenment feminists who try to attain equality with men by locating their agential powers in a mind separate from a body, she grows her powers out of her total situation. I note too that from her situation, she disciplines a self that is not vulnerable to negative emotions like greed or grief, an aim that recalls the Ancient Greek and Roman Stoics. Like them, she practices exercises that lead to joy and equanimity, or tranquility.

My question with regard to this ascetic again takes off from the individual/collective axis. Ram-Prasad references liberal, enlightenment feminism to argue that this female ascetic is better able to achieve a higher freedom and assert an autonomy by thinking through her body rather than abstracting from it. However, I’d like to ask a question with reference to a feminist critique of liberalism found in both Anglo care ethics and continental response ethics. Both these groups of feminist thinkers are critical not just of Cartesianism’s legacy but more pointedly of what I would describe as stoic tendencies of western philosophy. This stoicism divides the world too rigidly between external conditions, an external fate for the Greeks, or what we call good or bad luck, which is outside of one’s control, and an internal domain, where one cultivates virtues or good intentions. The stoics recommend training oneself so that one’s sense of wellbeing is disconnected from the ravages of an uncontrollable fate and located entirely in one’s character. Only there in one’s character or inner thought does one find freedom. This stoicism finds its way into modern individualism, most notably in Kant. The ascetic’s practices seem to resemble aspects of this stoicism with its excessively sharp separation of the higher self and its freedom from immersion in the material world. My question comes from a feminist critique of stoic individualism, a critique that argues that attempts to transcend one’s vulnerabilities and dependences on externals are not only fruitless but misdirected.²

We are essentially porous and vulnerable and, in that sense, relational and social creatures rather than, say, autonomous agents who might flourish by hardening ourselves against the onslaught of fate or turning inward to find rational guidance. To be sure, Ram-Prasad nicely brings in some aspects of the relational self, but the feminist thinkers referenced in this chapter 2 are primarily liberal or existential (for example, Simone de Beauvoir), feminists who fail to acknowledge and then celebrate this vulnerable self as one that is most connected, and in this sense, organically and holistically lived. For these feminists, influenced in part by affect theories of Sylvan Tomkins, among others, this vulnerable self is the primary source not just of hardship and trauma but also of joy for us communal creatures. (I will return to aspects of this erotic aspect of ourselves in the discussion of chapter 4.)

Chapter 3 turns to contemplation, which is defined as a disciplined attentiveness. Here I wonder if that attentiveness is not still also too located in a head brain, rather than our communal selves, selves that tune into what is around us through affects and through visceral responses all the

way down to our gut brain. Again, my question turns on the collective vs. the individual: the gut brain and viscera are increasingly acknowledged as essential parts of our attentive responsiveness to the world. The visceral core of the self impacts profoundly our mood and basic affects, and hence our affective attunement or affect-laden attention to the world. Indeed, to return to previous chapter themes, healing the self in a holistic way may need to engage the visceral underbelly of the mind.

Chapter 4 is a lovely and powerful climax to the entire book. It turns to erotic love, and foregrounds the vulnerable, porous self, a self that gives and responds to another with tenderness and beauty that is at once spiritual, erotic, and ethical. It's interesting that in the book's larger narrative arc, the porous self emerges most strongly in the final chapter, and in a chapter on erotic love. The writing and subtle reflection in this chapter is exquisite, and nothing like what I've seen in western philosophy. I'm not sure that we can find in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty anything quite like it, and I think Ram-Prasad could be right that it is because they are still caught a bit too much in our Cartesian legacy. But the chapter does raise for me the question of why the porous, vulnerable self, the self for whom even scents or a fragrant atmosphere vitally alters one's attention and desire, does not play a more central role in earlier chapters. Why does it appear less in other scenarios or dimensions of life? Why does it emerge centrally in sexual play between a man and a woman? Does not even the disciplined self, as much as the erotic self, say ourselves in the workplace, thrive or suffer due to harsh and harassing or welcoming atmospheres—this is certainly a key concern of the #MeToo movement. Perhaps even our disciplined self, whether contemplative or ascetic, is vulnerable as is the lover and the beloved, and that pleasure and harm comes from this vulnerability.

These various questions on the communal self and our vulnerability to larger social and other worldly forces fully accepts the book's central claims: its critique of ontological approaches to the self and its bodiliness; the need for a method that brings forward a holistic encounter with the world, and the limits of western attempts—even those of Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray—to do so. My aim is to invite more layers to the investigation, and perhaps in this small way I do nothing more than anticipate Ram-Prasad's announced next project, which is directed toward the emotions. After all, ever more attention to the full range of emotions, beyond but including the ascetic's transcendent joy and the more familiar erotic passion, highlights our social embeddedness as much as our bodily experience. Thus, I anticipate as well that such a project will underscore our radical dependence on not just a world and body but on others, not just others in dyadic relationships, whether in the doctor's office or in sexual encounters, but in the world where others impinge sometimes wanted, sometimes not into the core of our emotive selves. A world where we are caught up in histories of conflict, of tragic genocides as well as comical disagreements and ridiculous imperfections. And caught up in ways that—despite a quest for a separate life, whether in asceticism and contemplation, or in the privacy of romantic love or a doctor's office—inevitably entangle us in a larger social and politically charged world. A world where organic wholes are rent apart by power struggles, unintelligible histories, and unmanageable pain, but also by cathartic visions of wholeness, but only when lived with ever comical, ever tragic, ever imperfect others.

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¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Signet, 1987).

² For a feminist critique of this stoicism and the contrast with Morrison's communally oriented ethics, see my *The Soul of Justice: Social Bonds and Racial Hubris* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) and *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Freedom and Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

Reply

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I would like to start with thanking Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach for having organized the panel on which this discussion is based, and for offering this platform for its publication. I am grateful to Bruce Janz, Jessica Locke, and Cynthia Willet for not only taking the time and trouble to engage with my book but for doing so with such sympathetic acuity. I have mainly been relieved—even pleased—with how they have attended to and noticed just the sort of features of the book that I had hoped readers would. In other places, I have found myself appreciating insights through which they have extended my readings or suggested other fruitful paths to follow on our shared search for a sustainable intercultural philosophy. In what follows, I will try to take their observations and bring them together to consider, and occasionally clarify, the larger aims of my project.

1 Questions of Comparison

Other Than Phenomenology

I must begin with Janz's intriguing claim, with regard to my concluding statements on the unifying themes of my book (184-5), that I have, "in fact, done more than these statements suggest." His main reason, which recurs throughout his response, is that what I am trying to do "might be beyond phenomenology's usual resources," because "the inherent representationalism of phenomenology might stand in the way of its usefulness." In short, "ecological phenomenology" does more than extend how phenomenology may be thought of and used: it really is no longer phenomenology. Janz's rereading of my approach as lying elsewhere, beyond phenomenology, comes from his commitment to the view that Deleuze, with his rhizomatic thought that stands "in a tense relationship" with classic phenomenology, might be the better comparison than Merleau-Ponty for my own purposes. (Let me set aside here, as too far from my concerns, Janz's identification of this "classic phenomenology" with "mainstream Husserlian phenomenology"; I took Merleau-Ponty for comparison precisely because of my understanding that his program moves away from and beyond Husserl.)

This Deleuzian reading leads Janz to make a case for how my texts could be read beyond how I myself had read them. I would like to comment on four of the points Janz makes in this regard. The first is that calling ecological phenomenology a "methodology," is too "structured and teleological" compared to the "openness to the potentialities of the body" that leads us to "thrive as humans." I acknowledge that I could do more to explain the term "methodology." But by methodology, I do mean a constant, disciplined practice, the seeing of bodiliness "as always emerging into our attention" (24), something that contrasts with the program of Phenomenology ultimately to determine subjectivity. I admit that I do not think of this descriptive analytic in terms of Deleuzian potentialities.

This leads me to the second point: Janz reimagines my idea of ecology as dealing with the "site of creation of experience," thereby "generating new forms of subjectivity"; but, he says, phenomenology does not capture this process. I should clarify that I am not thinking of that dimension of human reality by which potentialities are brought into being, but rather, about attention to and description of what can be analyzed and elucidated and brought to our self-

understanding about human reality as explored in these classical texts.

Thirdly, Janz's primary (and critical) concern with phenomenology is that it is representational, which leads him to argue that what is required instead is to understand the process of poesis (with the implication that, since I am doing this, I ought to recognize it). That is true up to a point, and I am grateful to him for pointing out that there is in the text a bringing into being of experiential activity that did not hitherto exist (which is what I understand by Janz's use of "poesis"). But it could be said that the philological necessity of reading classical texts for the purposes of enunciating, in the first place, what questions should be asked of experience renders my task ineluctably representational. If the philosophical task were always only about the emergence of bodily possibilities, then there is the danger that we will unconsciously be trapped within the cultural limitations of what we even detect as such possibilities. So we must go through first the development of concepts that enrich the repertoire we have for the expressive exploration of bodily possibilities, and this is what I am trying to do. Janz asks for experience to be seen as intensities, noting that phenomenology is merely a "backward glance." As I say in the book, I do see the phenomenological methodology I follow as necessarily a backward glance: "The examples studied in this book therefore abstract away from the continuity of life in which experience is the pell-mell undergoing of change; the constraints of phenomenological study that helps with theorization no doubt is at an artificial remove from the fluidity of the unexamined life. This book is, certainly, limited by the nature of philosophical analysis to the examination of life, and thus life examined" (25).

Finally, it may be that the Husserlian program can be rendered otiose through a radically different line of questioning within western philosophy itself regarding the purpose of the study of experience and its articulation. I take this to be the motivation behind Janz's argument that a more rhizomatic, emergentist reading of experience—in which Deleuze rather than Merleau-Ponty is the interlocutor—is called for in comparative philosophy. It will be satisfying indeed if others take up that invitation and respond to Janz's call for an emergentist reading of bodiliness. The choice of what is related on each side, what is chosen to make the familiar unfamiliar and bring familiarity to the unfamiliar, is contingent on what we know already and what captures our comparativist imagination. So it is not so much that I would reject a comparison with Deleuze or defend my use of Merleau-Ponty as say that more needs to be done to explore how we may think comparatively.

Choosing Between Feminisms

The choice of comparison to frame a discussion constantly raises questions for the reader about alternative possibilities. Willett too has a pertinent question about comparison regarding my framing of the study of Sulabhā with references to "liberal, enlightenment feminism." Her point in this regard is that liberal and, indeed, existential feminism (such as de Beauvoir's, upon whom I draw) focuses on the idea of individuals as autonomous agents, and develops a type of stoic program of training to withstand the ravages of fate, which is premised on "an excessively sharp separation of the higher self" and "freedom from immersion in the material world." Willett observes that care and response ethics have offered feminist critiques of individualist feminism by arguing that it misrepresents the relational, vulnerable, and porous nature of our creaturehood. I do not at all object to Willett's line of thought. Thinking feminism and gender theory through pre-modern Indian materials is still in its early stages (a recent collection seeks to make a beginning),¹ but I would also point to the recent book by Vrinda Dalmiya² as indicating the direction of travel that Willett suggests. I did, however, deliberately choose for comparison a line of feminist thought that is

individualistic in a way characteristic of western modernity, to probe the relationship between gender and individuality in any ontology of self.

Care and response ethics are seen as original precisely because they are critical responses to a dominant mode of feminist thinking that has been individualistic in a way that is intimately associated with Enlightenment notions of autonomy. Later on, I will turn to consider Willett's sustained interrogation of the individual self, but for now, I will note that even the old-fashioned critique of the absence of an individualistic sense of self in classical India, made most notably by Louis Dumont in his *Homo Hierarchicus*, granted that the renouncer was, exceptionally, autonomous in that world. What has not hitherto been considered is the relationship between such (renouncer) individualism and gender, while Sulabhā is just the most compelling example of this intersection. My study of her therefore pushes the philosophical comparison up against the limits of historical context: philosophically, individualistic feminism provides a helpful foil for the consideration of Sulabhā's renunciatory discipline and freedom from materiality, while her argumentative stance is located in a world far removed from European modernity. The purely philosophical comparability allows us to focus quite precisely on questions of the ontology of the self, leading to my argument that Sulabhā's account of the human being is in fundamental ways utterly different from the post/Cartesian conception of the human being that informs liberal and existential feminism. In short, if individualistic feminism is the default modern approach to gender, then the case of Sulabhā enables exactly the comparability that permits us to interrogate assumptions about bodiliness, which is the purpose of the book as a whole.

2 Questions of Location and Tradition

The challenges of the comparative/intercultural enterprise are many. We have already seen two instances of the challenge of framing issues between philosophical traditions. Another is to try to deal with the complex relationships within a tradition itself. And this means not only within a cultural tradition broadly conceived, but also between competing interpretations of shared texts. This is an area on which Jessica Locke focuses when looking at Buddhaghosa and his relationship to other Buddhist schools, especially Mahāyāna.

Locke is supportive of my reading of Buddhaghosa's phenomenological methodology as non-ontological, but says that this is "because it doesn't need to be." By this she means that he is already committed to being an exponent of "the Buddha's metaphysical account of no-self." This therefore presents a tension between phenomenological description and "the centrality of metaphysics" in Buddhism, Locke argues. Her solution, in a sense on my behalf if we follow her analysis so far, is to say that "although intellectual arguments about metaphysics [...] are not wholly irrelevant to a practitioner's liberation, they do not accomplish that liberation in and of themselves." What is required is an integration of philosophical principles at a "deep, intra-personal level," which she sees demonstrated in the ecological phenomenological model. I think we do not disagree on the precise role phenomenological methodology plays in Buddhaghosa, but I have a slightly different way of reading the philosophical situation, which I acknowledge is not sufficiently clear in the book.

My reading of Buddhaghosa as Buddhist depends on a narrow reading of "metaphysics." Locke notes that in the introduction I say that "the most famous [...] systems of philosophical thought in India are metaphysical through and through" (24). But I do not mean that Buddhaghosa's is. I take metaphysics to be not the mere commitment to views on the nature of reality, but a "science or a study or a discipline," requiring a methodology of investigation.³ Now, in some sense we might take the Buddha as a metaphysician, although perhaps that trivializes the nature of

liberating insight. But for Buddhists, what we have are doctrines about how things really are, the commitment (made in faith) that makes them Buddhists in the first place. So, to begin with, that there is no unitary subject and no permanent substances are doctrinal commitments that guide the Buddhist life. As Locke notes, this is a “doxographical matter,” and that is what leads me to wonder if its acceptance by Buddhaghosa makes him a metaphysician in any sense. No-self metaphysics is the development of systematic arguments for why there is no-self, starting from the initial doctrinal commitment to no-self. And in my view, those who make such arguments in fact do claim that the arguments are themselves an “intimate examination” of how things are. For the Mahāyāna philosophical traditions, the arguments for a no-self view (and against self, howsoever that is construed) are a constitutive part of the path to *nirvāṇa* (I laid out a detailed version of this understanding quite long ago, in Ram-Prasad 2001).⁴ My view, for which I am indebted to Maria Heim, is that Buddhaghosa does not treat the systematic investigation of the nature of how things are as an intrinsic element of his path, and it is for this reason that he does not seek to argue for an ontology of no-self. In other words, there is a fundamental difference in the approach of the Mahāyāna schools and Buddhaghosa. For the former, the teaching of no-self becomes the prompt for an investigation into how that teaching can be defended (and any commitment to self refuted) through argument, so that investigation itself becomes an integral part of progression towards the attainment of insight. For the latter, the teaching is the prompt to delineate such practices of analysis as will ease the psychology of the practitioner away from the pull of a sense of self, and it is these practices that I characterize as following a phenomenological method. (I should note, as an aside, that phenomenological practices are also part of many Mahāyāna systems, perhaps notably of the early Yogācāra of Vasubandhu, but that has a different relationship to the Buddha’s teachings because of its occurrence within a metaphysics.)

This sort of discussion demonstrates in itself some of the difficulties of doing cross-cultural philosophy. Locke has very kind things to say of my book as an example of such an undertaking, although, of course, this is a tradition going back several decades and now growing rapidly with many eminent practitioners who have had an impact on the way philosophy is done in philosophy departments. But the preceding discussion shows the complexity of the task: although there is a burgeoning field of Buddhist philosophy in which Heim and my reading of Buddhaghosa is a contested matter, for those thinking of the philosophical questions cross-culturally, this may not be of any interest. Equally, while some doing Indological history of ideas may show interest in the relationship between Buddhaghosa and Mahāyāna, an argument that turns on the construal of metaphysics and phenomenological method would seem too ungrounded in text-critical detail to be of relevance. I can only say that the task of thinking globally of philosophy is an essentially collaborative task, ranging all the way from manuscript and critical text editing through exacting philology and translation, to a deeply contextual history of ideas, all the way to philosophical exposition of texts and philosophical argument loosely inspired by texts. And the comparative dimension may come in at several points, but especially as we move from the philological to the philosophical.

It is an open question as to at what point western philosophers, who have no institutional need at present to step outside the hegemonic narrative that modern history has provided them, will engage with these materials. In any case, metaphilosophical and institutional critiques of the exclusionary identity of western philosophy has to be accompanied by substantive, actual philosophizing in different registers, leaving reception to the openness of individuals and the shifting forces of cultural change.

3 Questions of Self

Might my book be a quest, as Willett charmingly puts it? If so, it is only one within a larger communal quest, as I have suggested. I must acknowledge, however, that the communal itself does not play a thematically explicit part within the book. Willett's sympathetic and occasionally lyrical response to my book nevertheless contains a persistent question about the absence (or presence "only in a peripheral way") of the communal within my exploration. This is an eminently fair comment. Willett repeatedly asks what role the communal—and therefore the self as "porous," "vulnerable," and "not separable from the world"—might play in ecological phenomenology. For her, the trouble is that ecological phenomenology has a "bodily focus" that ends up thinking too much about the individual self, without "bringing forward the importance of the communal." I cannot claim to have a simple answer to her line of questioning, but offer the following, loosely intertwined remarks.

First, my work here comes against the background of a certain twentieth-century prejudice against the very possibility of individuality in the Indian conceptual repertoire. It is true that postmodern western theory has turned against the dominant narrative of western individualism as a unique attainment in the history of human thought, but my concern was not to enter into that dialectic—so necessary within the historical trajectory of western philosophy—but to think of the native configurations of individual and society as they emerge in these classical Indian materials. My aim was to query the dichotomy between individual and social, self and world that seems to occur when we read Indian texts through the lens of western philosophical categories. My concern, then, when developing ecological phenomenology for this book was to test that stability with regard to the individual, her boundaries and identity in varied contexts.

Second, Willett is quite right to locate in theater and the study of emotion an apt place to look at human nature as porous, collective, intersubjective. I hope in my next book to deal with such issues in a study of emotion in classical Indian aesthetics and literature (developing as they do from Bharata's Treatise on Drama (*Nāṭyaśāstra*)).

Third, while Willett moves—in her perspective, quite naturally—from the issue of the relationship between the individual and the communal to thinking of the communal as a contrast to the elite, I am in the same position as students of the classical texts of any tradition: such materials are structurally elitist, even as their representations of humanity signify a conscious search for the universal. Although focused on other issues, Fred Smith's wide-ranging study (2007)⁵ touches upon classical Sanskrit (i.e., elite) texts and ethnographic studies of popular practice, comparing conceptions and expressions of "possession"; in doing so, his work illustrates the telling point that the classical texts are elite and one must turn to contemporary society to get an idea of how different social classes deal with the same issues. (This is one reason why left-leaning intellectuals in India tend to be wary of going back to the dense textual history of the past.) There is certainly a different and more demanding challenge involved in looking for the hidden voices, literary and historical, of the past, but here too we are more likely to find individuals than marginalized communities as a whole. From my perspective, there is so much yet to be done to excavate the philosophical possibilities of classical Indian texts compared to the Greek and Latin that the necessary elitism of the material, while requiring acknowledgement, does not remove the need for philosophical exegesis.

Willett deploys "the individual/collective axis" once more to ask a question that I find particularly probing: she argues that my framing of Sulabhā's argument for asceticism seems to depend on a set of ideas that cluster around a stoic, "liberal or existential" view of the autonomy of the individual in the face of external conditions. My response is again three-fold. First, it simply is true that classical Indian traditions have a pronounced tendency to value renunciatory autonomy (so

much so that Louis Dumont even claimed that the only conception of individuality in Indian thought and culture was the renouncer). And this is not for me a problem: indeed, it shows that there is as much contestatory variety in Indian thought as there is in the west. Second, and correspondingly, there are also traditions of thought that reject precisely this sort of autonomy. If there is one thing that runs through the staggeringly diverse literature of intense devotional love of the divine that is called “*bhakti*,” it is vulnerability as the very essence of the human spirit. Finally, and going back to my first point, my choice of the Sulabhā episode was specifically to point to a striking co-location of conceptions of autonomy and gender that I think makes a real contribution to that strand of contemporary feminist thinking that is most closely tied to the history of western philosophy, namely, liberal and individualistic feminism.

I will end with a very brief response to Willett’s final query about why the porous, vulnerable self that she espouses and which she finds in chapter 4 is not more central in other chapters. I would say that precisely the nature of ecological phenomenology makes room for the possibility that different contexts, concerns, saliences, and modes of exploration offer up different ways to find our selves. I am not arguing for a particular view of the subjective self but rather exploring how different views of that subject emerge in their contexts.

4 The Aim of the Ecological Program

My sensitive respondents appreciate my strategy of sidestepping the transcendental program of going back to self, experience, and world—a program about which in this book I am agnostic, occasionally skeptical, but which I have elsewhere myself pursued in detail for quarter a century. But their own questioning—Janz’s vigorous advocacy of emergentism, Locke’s skillful indication of the presence of metaphysics in classical India, Willett’s poetic plea for her vision of a vulnerable, porous, communal self—leads me to think of a putative overarching critique of my book. As, in consequence of giving irreducibly different accounts of the bodily subject, I appeal in different ways to my three respondents, should there be a worry that no unifying account emerges from my case studies? Perhaps that is something I should have asked and answered explicitly in the book, but I think it is something implicit in the very idea of ecological phenomenology as methodology.

Of course, unlike my respondents here who broadly support the idea of an ecological phenomenology, a traditional transcendental phenomenologist might object that this leads to a relativism towards the subject-self. But that line of reasoning would be circular. Only if one presupposes that the phenomenological undertaking can “overcome prejudice” and “go back to the things themselves,” to use those resonant Husserlian phrases, will one fret that contextual analysis will not adjudicate between different ways of talking of the subject. The implication of my methodology in this book—admittedly one that I have not brought out and argued explicitly for—is that even the transcendental project for the disclosure of the subject is contextualized by its purposes and methodology, just as much as the subject that shows itself in some particular description of love-making or medical diagnosis. This is not relativism but simply the recognition that the study of experience is structured by purpose and presented according to the capacities of the phenomenologist (broadly construed as the writerly investigator of subjectivity).

Obliquely, not in the texts themselves but in my analysis, I do question the confident presupposition that experience can be stripped away from a vantage point, until the phenomenologist as perfect subject attains the things themselves. It is a welcome fact that my respondents directly acknowledge the purpose of ecological phenomenology and do not ask of it precisely the transcendental program that it has eschewed. This has enabled me to learn a great deal

from their readings and subtle questioning of the book. In my response, I have to tried to offer some answers but in the main, I have sought to build on the implications of their questions.

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 - ² Vrinda Dalmiya, *Caring to Know: Comparative Care Ethics, Feminist Epistemology, and the Mahābhārata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
 - ³ Peter van Inwagen and Meghan Sullivan, “Metaphysics,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014 (Spring 2018 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/metaphysics/>.
 - ⁴ Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, *Knowledge and Liberation in Classical Indian Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).
 - ⁵ Fred Smith, *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).