

Response to Levine

MARK SIDERITS

Seoul National University (ret'd), South Korea (msideri@ilstu.edu)

In this short reply to Levine's critique, I defend the enterprise of 'fusion philosophy.' I agree that the sort of careful scholarly examination of Asian philosophical traditions that is often done under the banner of 'comparative philosophy' is of great importance. But it is a separate question whether those traditions have resources that would help us solve philosophical problems of current interest. This is the question fusion philosophy tries to answer.

Keywords: Asian philosophy, Buddhism, comparative philosophy, fusion philosophy

Like most philosophers, I welcome criticism of my work. And when the critic seems to have misunderstood what I wrote, I look for ways I might be clearer. Faced with what looks like a willful misreading, though, I usually remain silent. But Michael Levine's misrepresentations seem so egregious that when a presumably reputable journal chooses to publish them I feel compelled to try to set the record straight. Levine accuses me of seeing little or no need to engage in the formidable task of trying to understand another philosophical tradition. Since this is blatantly false, I find myself wondering what I said or did that led to this interpretation of my work. So I welcome this opportunity to say something in response—and also (inspired by recent developments in American political culture) to engage in a bit of brazen self-promotion.¹

Do we study philosophy out of interest in attempts by other philosophers to grapple with philosophical problems, or because we want to work toward solving such problems? For some the first motive will be uppermost, for some the second. But like many, I oscillate between the two. In works of what I call fusion philosophy, such as my (2015a), it is the second that dominates. But if one looks, for instance, at the 19 published essays collected in (2016) one will see that much of my work has been driven by the first.

As Levine should also know, having read my (2015b), I am well aware that attempts at fusion philosophy can go astray due to failure to fully grasp what is going on in the Indian philosophical tradition. Indeed Levine neatly suppresses evidence that I am sensitive to just this potential pitfall of the fusion enterprise. He quotes at length a passage in (2015b) in which I cite three examples where elements of the Western tradition have been problematically superimposed onto the Indian, but goes on to claim that I downplay or dismiss such difficulties. His quotation omits my references, though. One is to earlier work of my own. Indeed at the time I wrote (2015b) I had just finished writing postscripts to the papers collected in (2016), and the reference is to one of those papers. The reader who is interested in ascertaining the extent to which I worry about getting the details of classical Indian philosophy right might want to look at the postscripts in (2016).

The one concrete case Levine does discuss concerns my use, in (2015a), of the Abhidharma distinction between the two truths. There I expanded Parfit's dichotomous taxonomy of views about persons—Non-Reductionist and Reductionist—into a trichotomy, by adding a semantic dimension to the ontological and thereby generating a way of distinguishing between Reductionism and Eliminativism. But it is not clear that Levine actually sees how Abhidharma tools were being used there. If he did he would see that the move in question does not, as he thinks, still make the non-self theory a kind of Eliminativism. He might want to look

more deeply into *Empty Persons*. But here's a hint: the trichotomy I developed parallels that in which the middle path of dependent origination avoids the false presupposition common to eternalism and annihilationism: that there exists a person, something that might either endure or else undergo annihilation.

Levine does raise one interesting question when he asks why I bothered to include any reference to the Buddhist tradition in *Empty Persons* if the idea was just to engage in problem-solving. But as I thought I made clear in (2015b), I believe it is a travesty that the standard undergraduate philosophy curriculum does not devote as much attention to the study of Asian philosophical traditions as it does to the Western. Part of the point of doing fusion philosophy is to help make a case for changing that. At the same time, the undergraduate curriculum will only be broadened if there are appropriate teaching materials available. That was the chief motivation behind my textbook, (2007).

Levine claims that many fusion philosophers (he also mentions Miri Albahari and Owen Flanagan) would prefer to ignore the fact that Buddhism is a religion. I find his mention of Albahari and Flanagan puzzling, but I cannot speak for them. As for my own case, I know (since he mentions them) that Levine read the discussions of Buddhist soteriology in Chapters 2, 5 and 9 of (2015a). Why then does he characterize me as trying to hide the fact that Buddhist philosophy grows out of soteriological concerns? He says the fusion project is 'held in abeyance' in those discussions, but why does he think this? Is it because they concern ethics, which makes them somehow 'religious'? It is worth bearing in mind that Parfit's discussion of personal identity comes in the middle of a work on ethical theory. Moreover, if ignoring soteriological concerns and focusing instead on problem-solving is always an error, I wonder what Levine would say to Rāmakaṇṭha, the tenth century Brahmanical philosopher who appropriated Buddhist arguments for non-self to support his own Śaiva Siddhānta view while saying precious little about the soteriological context of those Buddhist arguments.²

Not everyone who studies Asian philosophy may want to do fusion philosophy. Indeed there are those who study Asian philosophy because they find the problem-solving practices of current mainstream philosophy completely misguided. Obviously fusion projects will not appeal to them. But other scholars of Asian philosophical traditions simply prefer to stick to what they see as their strong suit. Not only do I have no quarrel with them, I am immensely appreciative of their work. Indeed one highpoint of my career has been my collaboration with the eminent Buddhologist Shōryū Katsura on a new translation of and commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (2013). I hope to continue such collaborations. But I shall also continue to do fusion philosophy when I think there is something in classical Indian philosophy that merits the attention of philosophers trying to solve problems in analytic metaphysics, philosophy of mind and action theory. I just hope the Comparativist Correctness thought police don't come after me when I do.

Finally a word about labels. To call a piece of scholarship 'comparative philosophy' is to suggest that it principally concerns the comparison and contrast of elements drawn from two traditions. This is to be distinguished from straightforwardly philological and text-historical study of an Asian tradition, which is not at all East-West-comparative in nature. Some of the work that has appeared under the label 'comparative philosophy' over the last half century was motivated by the thought that comparing and contrasting are all one can really do when it comes to distinct philosophical traditions. Some was not, but was still largely confined to comparison and contrast. I coined the term 'fusion philosophy' to describe what I was trying to do in *Empty Persons* because I wished to signal that the intent was not to point to similarities and differences, but instead to try to solve a philosophical problem. Comparing and problem-solving strike me as quite different activities. Some dislike the term 'fusion'. I invite them to find a more apt expression for the activity. But 'comparative' strikes me as at best misleading.

Mark Siderits retired from the Philosophy Department of Seoul National University in 2012. His research interests lie in the intersection between classical Indian philosophy on the one hand, and analytic metaphysics and philosophy of language on the other.

¹ The Republican candidate in the 2016 US presidential election is someone (“The Donald”) whose chief claim to fame is his claim to fame. While I certainly don’t wish to emulate him in tooting my own horn (let alone in any other way), I shall be making reference to the following of my more recent works:

2007: *Buddhism As Philosophy*, Surrey/Indianapolis: Ashgate/Hackett, 2007.

2013: *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, With Shōryū Katsura, Boston: Wisdom, 2013.

2015a: *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*, Second edition, Farnham, Surrey, 2015a.

2015b: “Comparison or Confluence Philosophy?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2016: *Studies in Buddhist Philosophy: Mark Siderits*, ed. Jan Westerhoff, Oxford: Oxford University Press

² Śaiva Siddhānta is a Hindu school of Śaivite tantricism. For Rāmakaṇṭha’s appropriation of Buddhist argumentation see Alex Watson, *The Self’s Awareness of Itself: Bhatta Rāmakaṇṭha’s Arguments Against the Buddhist Doctrine of No-Self*, De Nobili Research Library XXXII, Vienna: Institut für Südasiens-, Tibet- und Buddhismuskunde der Universität Wien, 2006.