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COMPASSION AND SELF-AWARENESS
AS EVIDENCE OF INSIGHT

A review essay of Carl Olson, *Indian Philosophers and Postmodern Thinkers*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

CARL OLSON'S BOOK is evidently a companion volume to his *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Thinking* (SUNY Press, 2000. See Dennis McCort's review in *JAAR* 71:1 (2003): 225-228). I agree with Olson's claim that non-Western philosophy "is not irrelevant to the so-called postmodern world, and continues to have enduring intellectual value" (xiv), and I share Olson's stance in favor of both comparative and Indian philosophy. I applaud his intention and I recognize that this is, to some extent, a groundbreaking foray into an area requiring further investigation. However, I have serious reservations about the execution of the work. It is a valuable insight of Asian, particularly Buddhist philosophy, that self-awareness is required to develop insight and that insight engenders compassion. It seems to me that Olson both fails to demonstrate adequate self-awareness in his manipulation of the text and fails to show the compassion for postmodernism that would indicate insight. Rather than restraining his own eisegesis he conceals it in the rhetoric of dialogue (where there is only monologue) and he presents postmodernism in an entirely negative light, demonstrating a lack of insight.

Olson states that "it appears best to have different thinkers engage each other in mutual dialogue rather than to write in more general terms about Indian Philosophy and postmodern philosophy" (xiii). "The interpreter [he says] is the third figure that brings together the representatives from different philosophical traditions forming a triadic relationship and dialogue" (2). He presents these three parties as distinct, independent voices when all three are his own representations. Although he says that "it is possible to avoid any arbitrariness [a truly grand ambition!] in the process by grounding it in the historical situation of both the interpreter and the particular thinkers brought into dialogue" (3), he actually gives no historical situation, and in his own case he attempts to efface his self-representation from the text. Olson initially speaks of himself in the first personal singular (xii) but immediately changes to the self-concealing "we" and

remains concealed until the final conclusion. The “subjects discussed by the participants” (3) were in fact *not* discussed by the participants, and despite his recognition that “a definitive interpretation or dialogical exchange is impossible” (3), Olson nonetheless consistently gives the impression that this is not only possible but is definitively achieved in his work. He writes, “as we communicate with the other person” (4), thus begins the sleight of hand by which he contrives to achieve the impossible. “Each participant” does not “make his/her contribution to the dialogical exchange” (6); rather Olson determines their contributions. The thought of the other is not available but only the interpretation of the text. This is a ubiquitous and not an insuperable problem. However, if one’s interpretation of the text is presented as the actual thought of the other, representation too easily become misrepresentation.

Olson recognizes that in the case of David Dilworth, for example, there is “evidence of isogesis [sic], an unconscious reading into a philosophical text of what one anticipates to see or is trained to see” (14) but it never seems to cross his mind that his own eisegesis informs his own work. With unqualified confidence he can, for example, criticize David Loy because “he does not fully understand the process of deconstruction from Derrida’s perspective” (14) with the apparent implication that he, Olson, *does* “fully understand the process of deconstruction from Derrida’s perspective.” But, as we shall see, this confidence is unwarranted.

Consider the consistently negative pronouncements that Olson makes regarding the Western authors: “Deleuze and Guattari create something more akin to a postmodern, mechanistic nightmare” (78). “Deconstruction tends to be parasitic” (85). Some postmodern thinkers see nothing but difference (92). Deleuze, Guattari, and Lacan “all ... write in a style that tends to obscure rather than clarify a given point” (103). “The universal nature of suffering acknowledged by many Indian thinkers did not lead to philosophies of pessimism. The same thing cannot be said about a number of postmodern philosophies” (112). “Some postmodernists ... seem to think that death is revelatory and liberating” (127). There is “a tendency among some postmodern thinkers to deify death” (129), which culminates in “the postmodernists’ transformation of death into an apparent metaphysical principle” (130). Derrida cannot “adopt any thesis nor argue for any philosophical position for any substantial period” (192). [Mark C.] “Taylor’s position is radical, decadent, and a product of ignorance” (197). “Levinas and Lacan do not proceed to discover the relation and correlation between all things, and they fail to see the many as one” (230). “Excessiveness [is] typical of postmodern philosophy” (277).

Compare this to the consistently positive reading of Indian thought and one should be cautioned. “The words, sentences, and sounds of the sacred Vedas or

revelation have always existed as a transcendent deposit of truth, and are an accurate reproduction in the earthly realm of an eternal existent" (46). Where Bimal Krishna Matilal "stresses the importance of trust in Indian philosophy ... There is no trust in the Indian sense in postmodern theory. Using Derrida as a prime example, there is only a radical scepticism and an attempt to lead us astray by making us unsure about who is addressing what to whom" (48). A more positive and sympathetic reading might find that there *is* trust in postmodern theory (trust in desire, in erring, in carnival, in difference, and so on), and that there is no attempt to lead us astray in the observation that such trust is not absolutely reliable grounds for self-justification.

The main point here is the *asymmetry* of the sympathy and trust—the compassion—that Olson shows to the Indian philosophers but withholds from the postmoderns. Compared to Derrida's view of language, he says, "the Indian tradition discusses language in a much less paradoxical way" (33). However, the ensuing claim is that "in the formative Vedic texts of Indian culture, V_c (speech, word, and by extension language) is a creative force that acts as the inner power and essence of things ... [and he continues] ... Language is a fundamental mystery in the Vedic texts that is located at the very core of reality" (33). It takes considerable sympathy to see this pronouncement as "much less paradoxical" than Derrida's.

In order to maintain his own interpretation Olson not only effaces his own activity in the text, but also effaces other distinctions of considerable importance. He ignores the distinction between intent and intentionality, for example, (53f.).

Another point at which Derrida and Abhinavagupta are at odds is the intentionality of the speaker or writer. Abhinavagupta makes clear his position on intentionality: 'When we hear the words, "Bring the Cow," and an intention of the speaker is thereby suggested, a meaning characterized by that particular intention is associated with [i.e. prompts] the activity of bringing the desired object...' From what we have said about Derrida's understanding of language, it would appear that he would discard it. According to two of his supportive interpreters, this is not the case because he does not do away with the phenomenological idea of intentionality. When referring to the intentionality of a text. (53-4)

This neglects the distinction between the "intention of the speaker" and "phenomenological intentionality," the technical term introduced by Brentano and adopted by Husserl to refer to the concept that phenomenal states are "about" something other than themselves. Thereafter, Olson confuses the phenomenological sense of intentionality with "the intention of the speaker" (55). This misunderstanding supports the representation of "Derrida's problems in determining for certain the intention of the speaker" (55). Had Olson entered into

more open dialogue with available scholars rather than restricting himself to his lone interpretation of text such errors could have been easily rectified.

The distinction between postmodern and other critical discourse is also effaced. For example, "neither is there any given presence in written language, because there is only representation, even though a written statement can be present to a reader ... [which Olson calls] this postmodern position" (16). In fact, this is not a particularly postmodern position but merely a critical one. The very inclusion of Charles Taylor in this work is an example of this particular effacement of difference. That Charles Taylor is "a philosopher writing during the postmodern period [Olson forgets his usual "so-called" here] who is critical of many of its aspects," and who thus "give[s] the discussion of this chapter some balance" (143) could apply to almost any late 20th century philosopher.

Crucially, distinctions between the meanings of terms used by postmoderns and Indian philosophers are not considered and difficulties of translation ignored. "Event" as used by Derrida and R_m_nuja (49), for example, are assumed to refer to identical concepts. "Reality" as used by Derrida is supposed to be the same as "Brahman" as used by R_m_nuja (51). "Identity" as used by Charles Taylor is assumed to be identical to "the self" as used by Radhakrishnan (172). Most importantly, I feel, the distinction between meaning and final meaning (193), between truth and absolute truth (282), is repeatedly ignored.

Another distinction that becomes a casualty of Olson's asymmetrical "dialogue" is the distinction among the various "postmoderns" he considers. Although he initially accepts that "the so-called postmodern philosophers do not speak with a single unified voice" (xiii) and that there is a "variety of postmodern thinking" (26), he often forgets this and writes as though there is a unity of voice and a singular position: "the postmodern netherland" (80). To assume the coherence and homogeneity of a position called "postmodernism" is itself an effacement of significant differences.

Olson includes eight major Indian philosophers (Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhava, Abhinavagupta, Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo, J.N. Mohanty, and Daya Krishna) and his analysis includes cogent and useful vignettes of their positions. He considers eight "postmodern" thinkers, (Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, Levinas, Lacan, Kristeva, Mark C. Taylor, Charles Taylor). This is itself a massive undertaking, requiring enormous scope of reading. However, Olson's own eisegesis is so extreme that whoever does not share his vision simply "fails to grasp" or "goes astray from" the truth. J. J. "Clarke goes astray when he agrees with Said that all knowledge is political" (23). Harold "Coward's observation ... misses the mark for Derrida" (39) and his "characterization of Ankara ... is misleading" (41), his "interpretation of a teleology in Derrida's philosophy is an

untenable position" (46). David Kalupahana is "misleading and erroneous ... to refer to the Buddhist method as deconstructive" (85). "The Buddhist paradox that is discovered by [Grace] Burford is more akin to a misinterpretation" (85), and so on.

Notably, it is any view of postmodernism as positive that Olson corrects, and never the views of the Indian thinkers. His willful withholding of sympathy from the postmodern position requires occasionally brutal insensitivity, the worst example of which is when he points out that J. N.

Mohanty and Daya Krishna also do not follow Derrida when he denies any significant distinction between discourse and reality. If we use the horrific case of genocide to illustrate the problem, the Indian thinkers suggest that there is a definite difference between discussing and practicing genocide. Otherwise, there is a danger of rationalizing such heinous action (56).

How else can we read this other than suggesting that Derrida not only is in danger of rationalizing genocide, but perceives no difference whatsoever between discourse about something and the thing itself? Apparently Olson considers Derrida a rather stupid and evil man.

I think it likely that it is "the postmodern assault upon rationality" (103) that occasions such antipathy. Olson considers this attack in his penultimate chapter, "Rationality and Madness" (itself a telling juxtaposition). While the postmoderns are seen as waging war in the cause of unreason, the Indian thinkers are portrayed as paragons of reason, despite the fact that, for example, "Madhava asserts that Brahman, a subject of all revealed scripture, can be perceived by means of the words of scripture, which is self-authoritative, and the only way to prove the existence of God" (202), which is scarcely an accolade to Madhva's rationality.

Olson refers to Edith Wyschogrod, who has "characterize[d] postmodern thought as henophobic: 'the attack on unity is bound up with postmodernism's antifoundationalism, its antipathy towards the notion that there is a privileged source of truth and meaning' " (207, from *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 234). On the contrary, I suggest that this is a common feature of Indian and postmodern thought. The Indian tradition has refused to adopt a single image of, or single path towards, ultimate reality. It is more accurate to speak of the *henophilia*—and I prefer the stronger monomania—peculiarly inherent in modern philosophy, that both Indian and postmodern thought avoid. However, in the ensuing discussion of Immanuel Kant's analysis of reason Olson insists that "not only does the law of reason require us to seek unity for Kant, but it also makes

possible the coherent employment of the understanding. Therefore, to be without reason implies to be devoid of unity, to risk becoming mad, and to be hopelessly at the mercy of the irrational" (244). This seems to be at the heart of Olson's (mis)representation. He sees postmodernism's attack on a final, unitary meaning, on an absolute and singular reason, as a removal of all meaning and of all reason and thus a path leading necessarily to an entirely unstructured chaos of unreason and to madness. Since "some of the postmodernists give us a view of the self that is not conducive to the development of rationality" (248), since "there is no ontological basis for rationality" (248), Olson assumes the worst. He concludes that "Dionysian madness and frenzy ... is suggested by the notion of carnivalesque" (265), where what was suggested was "causing a little of Dionysus's blood to flow in the organic veins of Apollo" (261). He moves unhesitatingly from Nietzsche's statement that there are no absolute truths to an assumption of "Nietzsche's position on the impossibility of truth" (282, re. *Human, All too Human*, Cambridge University Press, 1986,13). That "rationality holds no privileged position in postmodern thought" (247) does not, if taken with a little compassion for those who make such a suggestion, lead to being "hopelessly at the mercy of the irrational" (244). This same kind of unsympathetic attitude, if applied to the Indian thinkers, could come to the same conclusions about them. However, on the contrary, Olson defends Shankara, who "is not simply rejecting reason, and ... does not intend to advocate an anti-rational intuitionism. Since reason is not completely self-sufficient and can lead to conflicting results, it is necessary for it to be guided by revelation for it to possess any genuine utility" (251). Had Olson been as forgiving and accommodating to the postmoderns, he could have said something similar in their case. To conclude that "going astray is exactly what some postmodern thinkers advocate with their radical attitude towards rationality, whereas Indian thinkers have discovered a way to stay on the path to liberation without relying upon rationality, although this way is not irrational" (268) is simply the trace of Olson's manipulation of the text. He judges postmodernism by some of its representatives, represented and misrepresented without compassion, while he classifies Indian thinkers (notably without a quantifier here, some or all?) without regard for their multitude of radical, bhang-smoking, self-mortifying, one-arm tapasyins and standing babas.

In the final analysis, Olson recognizes that "Derrida is not anti-rational," rather his "method of deconstruction and his attempt to think *différance* is an attempt to think the limits of reason and to push rationality to its limits (208-09). However, this seems—like the qualifications of the last few pages of his text—to be too little, too late. The portrayal of postmodernism and the puppeteering of the postmoderns has already been effected. Having begun from a position of antipathy towards the postmodern, it is entirely predicatable that Olson comes to the conclusion that it is nihilistic. What he actually says is that Shankara,

Ramanuja, Abhinavagupta, et al “can assert with some justification that postmodern philosophy can be classed as nihilistic” (287) and thus he conceals his own opinion in the “dialogue” and attempts to exonerate himself from his own judgment in the last five pages of his work. For the first time since the Preface he brings back the first person singular and claims that “with respect to Derrida, I do not agree that his position leads necessarily to nihilism ... [and] ... that other postmodernists are too life-affirming to be classified as nihilist (288). But nothing he has said in his description of postmodernism so far actually supports this conclusion.

Given the asymmetry of sympathy and the effacement of difference employed by Olson, I cannot conclude that the confidence with which he purports to deliver to us the original thought and intention of the authors, what they mean, what they would reply to one another in such a dialogue, is warranted. The incredible confidence that permits him to report that “Derrida perceives Abhinavagupta’s conception of *Par_v_c* ... as a blatant form of logocentrism” (52). Or that “Derrida finds this [late Vedic] type of creation myth to be very interesting” (75) is suspect. Although Olson claims that in his work “a wide variety of opinions have been offered on various topics” (272), the final impression is one of a kaleidoscope of broken fragments of both Indian and postmodern philosophy given apparently coherent structure only in the mirror of Olson’s own very singular representation. Disembodied, decontextualized fragments are ripped from the canvases of great masters, a cacophony of sound bites is sampled from the classics, as Olson “engages” Kristeva “with” *Nik_ya* Buddhism, or “engages” Derrida “with” Shankara, manipulating these thinkers like tin soldiers on a papier-maché battlefield.

Olson relates Radhakrishnan’s observation that “scepticism thrives in periods of transition” (from *An Idealist View of Life*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1932, 61) and suggests that “postmodernism represents a period of transition ... [so] ... the strong strain of scepticism in postmodern philosophy begins to make more sense” (258). However, he fails to consider his own scepticism in respect of the postmodern, engendered by the transition away from the henophilic or monomaniac obsession with one, single, correct answer to every question—one single solution to every puzzle—provided unerringly by the application of a singular sound reason. Those of us unafflicted by this obsession need to exercise considerable compassion for those who are still in its thrall. Once committed to such a compelling metaphysics, it must be a truly terrifying prospect to be told to give it up, like abandoning the gravity of the planet’s surface to live in free fall.

Finally, I support Olson’s recognition of the relevance of Indian thought—these philosophers deserve a sympathetic hearing and they are more in need of a champion than the contemporary Western writers. I also agree with his

assessment that “within the context of this dialogue between postmodern thinkers and selected Indian thinkers, this work represents a beginning and not an end” (292). However, I cannot agree that this can be achieved by the denigration and misrepresentation of contemporary Western philosophy or by the camouflage of the authorial voice in the text. Indian philosophy itself tells us that self-awareness is the beginning of insight and that insight engenders compassion. The lesson to be learned here is that it is sometimes the task of understanding our closest neighbors that requires our greatest effort.

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