

deserving and undeserving poor. Martin's text is only a beginning. We can look forward to further reflections on these issues.

PATRICK O'CONNOR
 Nottingham Trent University
 e-mail: patrick.oconnor@ntu.ac.uk

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Asher Walden *The Metaphysics of Kindness: Comparative Studies in Religious Meta-Ethics*. (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2015). Pp. x + 165. £52.95/\$80.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 7391 8378 6.

Proficient works of comparative philosophy, which operate competently across diverse philosophical traditions, are relatively few and far between. Asher Walden's *The Metaphysics of Kindness* is one such book. Taking as its central theme 'the meta-ethical problem of justifying the standard for moral judgment' (32), the book comprises a detailed exploration of responses to this problem by four main philosophical protagonists: Zhu Xi (twelfth-century China), Arthur Schopenhauer (nineteenth-century Germany), Śāntideva (eighth-century India), and Nishida Kitarō (twentieth-century Japan). The author's knowledge of each of these thinkers is penetrating; his exposition is, for the most part, exemplary, with due attention being given to helpful contextual information, such as relevant philosophical influences and cultural milieu; and the comparative analysis is illuminating. Not only are the ideas of each of the four thinkers brought into sharper focus through comparison and contrast with those of the other three, but Walden also makes instructive reference to several other philosophers along the way – including Berkeley, Hume, Kant, William James, Wittgenstein, and Quine – thereby preventing readers whose primary acquaintance is with the western philosophical tradition from feeling lost at sea. Without neglecting the particularities of modes of philosophizing that are historically and geographically far flung, the book admirably demonstrates how philosophers at different times and in disparate circumstances can be grappling in fruitfully complementary ways with cognate issues.

The book consists of five chapters following a short introductory preface. Chapters 2–5 each take one of the four main thinkers as their principal subject, while chapter 1 introduces the book's central theme. Chapter 1 might have been entitled 'The problem of the standard', since it introduces the metaethical problem of determining a standard, or criterion, against which to assess any given system of values. But Walden entitles it 'Two moral paradigms', since he initially frames the discussion in terms of a contrast between two 'moral visions', one of which perceives the environment as possessing only instrumental (primarily

monetary) value and the other of which perceives it as being intrinsically valuable. Connecting these outlooks with views that portray the world as a site of, respectively, antagonistic struggle for survival or harmonious mutual beneficence, Walden proposes that there is no 'non-question begging way' of establishing which vision is right (8). Moving through a discussion of Nietzsche's dichotomy between slave and master moralities, Walden sets up a Daoist critique of any appeal to nature for a standard of morality by outlining the disagreement between Confucians and Mohists. The Confucians advocated the internalization of ritual modes of behaviour, which could then be applied to current situations. The Mohists, meanwhile, advocated a 'roughly utilitarian' principle of 'benefit and harm' (14). While acknowledging the complexities and apparent inconsistencies internal to the Daoist tradition, Walden deftly invokes the parabolic stories of Zhuangzi to make a Daoist case for the groundlessness of moral judgements, concluding that 'people choose to become Confucians and Mohists, ultimately, for no explicit reasons at all, spontaneously and naturally, in the sense that no reason could be employed to justify such a decision that would not beg the question' (24). Walden proposes that this leaves us with a choice between, on the one hand, accepting the groundlessness of our values and simply getting on with life, or on the other hand, adopting a religious fideism – an affirmation that faith trumps reason in any case. While there is, perhaps, a sense in which the book could have ended there, Walden recognizes that, for many people, especially philosophers, neither of these abandonments of foundational reasons will appear attractive. The remainder of the book is thus an exercise in examining possible responses to the problem, though not, Walden stresses, with the aim of finding a definitive solution. His more modest ambition is merely to clarify further the nature of the problem by studying the work of the four philosophers he has selected (33).

There is, however, something disingenuous about Walden's insistence that he is not seeking a solution to the problem of the standard, for he has deliberately chosen four thinkers in whose work he finds some version of a sentimentalist theory of moral judgement – a theory according to which the feeling of compassion constitutes 'a kind of meta-virtue', furnishing the 'basis for all the other virtues' (viii) – and there is no disguising the fact that he is himself sympathetic to such sentimentalist strategies. However, Walden somewhat mischaracterizes the degree of affinity between the philosophers he discusses. He asserts, for instance, that all of them endeavour to give the virtue of compassion metaphysical support by showing that it 'is *in some sense* justified by the nature of ultimate reality' (33). But even with the stress on 'in some sense', it is questionable whether this description applies to Śāntideva, who, if we are to believe Walden's own perceptive interpretation in chapter 4, maintains that compassion cannot be grounded in ultimate reality, but only in the conventions of human society.

Notwithstanding any slightly misleading characterizations of the project as a whole, Walden's respective treatments of Zhu Xi, Schopenhauer, Śāntideva, and

Nishida are accomplished. The discussion of Zhu's Neo-Confucian philosophy is helpfully framed by an exposition of 'the naturalist theodicy problem' (60): the problem of reconciling a conception of nature as fundamentally good with the recognition that humans, despite being part of nature, often behave very badly. Walden brings out Zhu's solution to this problem by guiding the reader diligently through an elucidation of key concepts, such as the concept of *li*, which pertains to the ordering or patterning of things in general, and that of *xing*, which concerns the specific nature of human beings. Once we recognize that there is no contradiction between the claims that human nature (*xing*) is good, and that the actual functioning of human beings often fails to live up to that nature – much like the actual functioning of an eye often falls short of perfect vision – then the naturalist problem of evil evaporates. This intersecting articulation of salient concepts provides a rich background for laying out Zhu's moral sentimentalism and his contention that moral excellence is to be cultivated by striving to emulate the styles of action typified by great sages.

The discussion of Schopenhauer follows smoothly on, with Walden not only highlighting a direct reference to Zhu in Schopenhauer's own essay *On the Will in Nature* but also indicating some points of similarity and difference in these two thinkers' work. Schopenhauer's own elaborate metaphysical system is expounded at some length, including especially his idiosyncratic reinterpretation of the notion of Platonic Ideas. According to Schopenhauer, compassion manifests an implicit appreciation of the unity of the will that underlies all beings, while our character is a kind of Idea that is not amenable to change. Some pleasing writing on Walden's part is occasionally besmirched by moments of crudity, such as when he remarks that, given the immutability of human character, even if one learns the metaphysical truth about the nature of the will, 'You may still be a selfish jerk, as Schopenhauer himself was, by all reports' (96). This chapter also suffers from a serious referencing error. Although Walden quotes from Schopenhauer's essay *On the Basis of Morals* in several places, the chapter's endnotes imply that he is quoting from *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*.

The book's most philosophically engaging chapter is the one on Śāntideva, for it is here that Walden's interpretative skills get to work not only on explicating the philosophical and soteriological aspirations embodied in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, but also on clarifying why affirming the groundlessness of our moral lives need not amount to moral nihilism. The mutual infusion of philosophy and soteriology is brought out through Walden's attentiveness to how contemplating 'the equality of self and others' serves a heuristic purpose in the context of Buddhist ethical and meditative discipline, as opposed to its being a metaphysical doctrine theoretically undergirding that discipline (120). And the theme of groundlessness in morality is insightfully expounded by means of pertinent comparisons with the responses of western philosophers (Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, Quine) to sceptical challenges in theoretical epistemology. This is also the chapter in which Walden best displays his ability to engage with secondary

sources, by summarizing and contributing to hermeneutical debates between Paul Williams, Mark Siderits, and Stephen Harris. A presentational weakness in the chapter, and in the book more generally, is the absence of diacritical marks in the spelling of Indic terms. This is disappointing in view of the fact that the publisher was willing to go to the trouble of including some Chinese logograms in the chapter on Zhu Xi. Also disappointing is Walden's incongruous use of Pāli vocabulary (most notably *vipassana*) when explaining the meditative methods articulated in Śāntideva's Sanskrit text.

In the final chapter, on Nishida's notion of 'the unity of experience', Walden does a laudable job of contextualizing Nishida's thought in relation both to his Japanese philosophical forebears and to the confluence of traditional and modern factors that characterized his education. Walden does his best to make Nishida's thought intelligible by comparing it with the notion of pure experience in William James's radical empiricism and by contrasting it with the kind of idealism typified by George Berkeley. But Nishida's enigmatic rhetoric, at least as it comes across in English translation, makes this material difficult. His metaphysical vision, which emerges from an attempt to reduce all multiplicity and binary pairs to an all-embracing unity, ends up turning 'consciousness' or 'the self' into the supreme monistic principle, with everything else, including 'the good', being mere activities of that principle. Any philosophy that subsumes everything under a single principle is liable to undergo strain when trying to articulate an ethics of concern for other people, and this is undoubtedly true of Nishida's efforts. 'To fulfill the greatest demands of the self and to actualize the self is to actualize the objective ideals of the self – that is, to unite with objectivity', he writes. 'In this regard, good conduct is love. Love is the feeling of congruence between self and other, the feeling of union of subject and object' (quoted in Walden, 150). But this union is supposed to be somehow internal to 'the self', and hence, as Walden puts it, 'the attribution of subject versus object is only a product of our interpretation of experience, not the experience itself. Thus, pure experience becomes the source and measure for the analysis of the Good' (150). In the final paragraphs of the chapter, which constitute the climax of the book, Walden ventures some further elucidation by contrasting Nishida's vision with that of Schopenhauer. The book ends by describing as 'strategically vague' Nishida's contention 'that the standard for conduct is the complete development of the self', and admitting that this provides not 'a standard that can be used in different instances', but merely 'an indication of the standard that is actually being used on an unconscious level' (153). I was convinced neither that Nishida's strategic vagueness (those less charitable than Walden might call it obscurity) gives us even that much, nor that this pronouncement of Walden's was a satisfactory place to end the book.

A concluding summary of the book's main themes, perhaps offering some evaluation of their respective strengths and weaknesses, would improve this book. Also valuable would have been more general reflection on the enterprise of cross-cultural comparative philosophy. While the book itself embodies an

impressive way of going about such a project, Walden could have brought out explicitly what he considers to be the benefits of this method of working and how to avoid pitfalls.

The book's other shortcomings include a thin and inaccurate index, frequent typographical errors, and some rather loose referencing. Although the author's familiarity with his sources is evident, he frequently uses phrases such as 'According to Hume . . .', 'Quine argues that . . .', and 'As Kant observed . . .' without offering any indication of particular texts.

Despite these deficiencies, the book is in many respects demonstrative of comparative philosophy at its best, exemplifying how philosophizing in general – and philosophizing about ethical and religious matters in particular – can productively expand beyond the confines of debates internal to contemporary western thought.

MIKEL BURLEY
University of Leeds
e-mail: m.m.burley@leeds.ac.uk