

# H-Net Reviews

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**Gereon Kopf.** *Beyond Personal Identity: Dougen, Nishida, and a Phenomenology of No-Self.* Richmond: Routledge, 2001. xx + 298 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7007-1217-5.

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*Beyond Personal Identity* is in many ways a brilliant work of comparative philosophy that does an outstanding job in taking on the challenge of relating the complex thought of Japanese giants Dougen and Nishida to various Western conceptions of the person. Kopf succeeds in developing his own philosophical approach to the main issues of nonduality and present-oriented self-awareness, while staying true to the respective thinkers involved in the examination. He is clearly bucking recent trends in the field of Buddhist studies that have emphasized increasingly social-historical methods, but has pulled off a major coup by adhering to his vision of the role of scholarship. Along with Dan Lusthaus's *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-Shih Lun* (Curzon, 2003), which deconstructs the issue of idealism, this work goes a long way toward rehabilitating philosophical approaches to Buddhist doctrine by analyzing text as text rather than trying to relate—and in some cases reduce—text to a reflection or expression of its reconstructed context. At the same time, Kopf's work, understandably as it is his first book, has some basic limitations which I will address with constructive criticism.

The main value of this book is that it takes the reader on a fascinating journey through a wide variety of Western and Buddhist notions of what constitutes the person and their relation to the world. Kopf's "theory of personal identity investigates three central questions: How is it possible to identify a person (myself and others) as an individual human being? How is it possible to distinguish between two individual persons? What guarantees the constancy and identity of an individual person over time?" (p. 7). Chapter 1 is primarily dedicated to critiquing Western notions that have substantialist implica-

tions, either deliberately and directly or indirectly in an embedded fashion by favoring an essentialist view that personal identity persists over time. Here Kopf demonstrates a mastery of contemporary philosophical materials and of how to examine them critically.

The four chapters in part 2 of the book simultaneously unveil Kopf's theory of the tri-partite structure of the person—selfhood, otherness, and continuity—and the reasons why he considers that Dougen and Nishida do overcome the flaws and lacunae in Western views of a false sense of constancy. The reason for the fourth chapter (chapter 5) is that Kopf goes into more depth on the third part of the structure, that is, the matter of how the person seems to maintain its identity over a prolonged period, by dividing this into the issues of "continuity of experience" and "temporality." In each chapter, he makes it clear how Dougen and Nishida appropriate the basic Buddhist doctrines of no-self, dependent origination, and impermanence in formulating their unique perspectives. He convincingly shows that Dougen's notion of the dharma-stage (*juu-houi*) as articulated in "Genjokouan" and Nishida's notion of the discontinuity of continuity stake out the distinctive Zen view. According to Kopf, "the Zen Buddhist notion of immediate now and non-relative present should not be mistaken for a merely atemporal oneness, which melts all individual time-moments into an undifferentiated oneness, but rather as the dialectic of linear temporality and mystical atemporality" (p. 198).

In part 3 Kopf fleshes out the meaning of the Zen phenomenology of temporal existence as the central component of a philosophy of personal identity—or, rather, of trans-personal non-essentialist experience—by provid-

ing a highly original interpretation of Dougen's doctrines of the "presencing" (*genjou*) of "total-working" (*zenki*) in light of Nishida's paradox or self-contradictory identity of "walking eastward by walking westward." He concludes with a fascinating comparison of Derek Parfit's survivalist philosophy, which represents a Western approach to present-oriented experience, with the Zen view that "the experiential 'I' discovers in its process of self-awakening that it does not emerge as an isolated existence but that it is existentially embedded in the trans-subjective infrastructure of the cosmos, which is expressed in the present event" (p. 260).

The accomplishments of *Beyond Personal Identity* are considerable, but the limitations of Kopf's writing and method are also apparent in two main areas. I offer these comments not to diminish an overall appraisal of the work but to point out directions that I feel would enhance his future publications.

The first area of criticism is that Kopf's style is often wordy, repetitive, and jargon-laden to the point that the reader cannot help but be distracted from trying to follow the main argument. For example, I found table 1 (p. 81) very helpful in providing a summary of seven items dealing with the topic of selfhood, but when I first read table 2 (p. 122) dealing with otherness and table 3 (p. 201) dealing with time, I thought there must have been a misprint because they all looked identical. Then I realized that in the second and third tables exactly one new item was added (though not highlighted) on each occasion, and this called to my attention an overall frustration with the book.

Furthermore, while the exploration of diverse philosophical perspectives is admirable, Kopf trots out so many different conceptual templates that they end up piling on top of each other. The author tends not to break free of them and does not quite manage to formulate a meta-language that is used consistently and effectively

throughout the book. I am reminded of a review of a novel by 2003 Nobel laureate for literature J. M. Coetzee, of which it is said, "[an] imaginary 17th-century writer is protesting against scientific abstractions, and asking what place there is for poetry in a world of science. He argues that there is a need for a new language, closer to nature. As yet he can find no language for the revelations he gets from ordinary things." [1]

The second area of criticism has to do with the treatment of the writings of Dougen and Nishida. For the most part, Kopf's analysis is limited to a relative handful of already well-known passages from both thinkers. One exception is that he engages a relatively obscure passage from Dougen's "Sansuikyō," which makes a distinction between "people outside the mountains" (which Kopf equates with delusion) and "people inside the mountains" (which is equated with realization). However, I am not convinced that the source sufficiently upholds what Kopf makes out of this or that Kopf clarifies the passage in relation to the otherwise insightful distinction he suggests between habitual and genuinely realizational self-awareness. In addition, I understand that in doing philosophy, Kopf is probably not interested in the intellectual historical venture of exploring ways in which Nishida was influenced by Dougen by looking at his journal entries, for example. Yet, it seems that he could have done more to examine critically the relation between the philosophical implications of the two thinkers, who otherwise blur and blend too easily into oneness.

Nevertheless, Kopf's book will stand as one of the most original attempts to find the intersections between medieval and modern Japanese thought as well as between East Asian and Western philosophies of selfhood.

Note

[1]. Hermione Lee, review of J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, *The Guardian* (August 30, 2003).

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