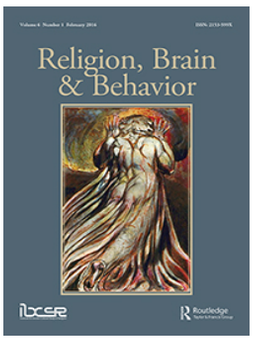

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Jordan Kiper

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Right views: the shared insights of Buddhism, biology, and existentialism

Buddhist Biology: ancient eastern wisdom meets modern western science, by David P. Barash, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, 186 pp., US$25.05 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-998556-2

Exceptional among contemporary psychologists, David Barash has long provided his readers with intellectual vantage points for examining scientific and humanistic issues together, and combining empirical and normative views for considering important aspects of the human condition. Having almost singlehandedly championed peace and conflict resolution studies, he has steadily moved toward other interdisciplinary research projects, drawing from evolutionary biology and philosophy, to offer valuable and often practical insights about human psychology. In several fascinating articles and books, for instance, he has afforded outlooks on human aggression, altruism, and sexuality, all of which might be best described as what Buddhists call *right views*: seeing life, nature, and the world as they really are, from which one comes to understand how reality works, and realize the significance and need for human values therein.

It only seems fitting, then, that Barash write *Buddhist Biology: Ancient Eastern Wisdom Meets Modern Science*, a book that draws from Buddhism, biology, and even existential philosophy to consider human existence and what it means for individuals to live and die in the natural world (p. 186). As with his previous works, Barash is forthright, from the outset, about what he does not intend his book to be: in this case, an examination of biology from a strict Buddhist perspective (p. 3). Rather, he intends to show how biology and a non-mystical form of Buddhism (i.e., the basic precepts of Buddhist philosophy, constrained by scientific knowledge) provide useful ways of seeing the world (p. 19). By combining these viewpoints, along with existentialism, Barash admits that his book is less of a technical or analytical treatment of "Buddhist biology" per se, or even "biological Buddhism," and more akin to "a kind of personal manifesto, critiquing some of the regrettably unscientific aspects of Buddhism – clearing away the superstitious rubble and, I hope, setting the stage for an exploration of common ground between Buddhism and biology" (p. 6).

While such an open and arguably idiosyncratic approach may disappoint some readers, namely those looking for a more rigorous text along the lines suggested by the title, Barash's "personal manifesto" is still grounded in the basics of Buddhist philosophy and evolutionary biology, making it a book worth reading. It is also well written, full of illustrative examples of the parallels between Buddhism and biology, and intriguing arguments that skillfully combine empirical and normative ways of viewing the human condition.

Having read the book with great interest, I shall set aside the grand narrative of the book – that is to say, the "meaning of life" offered by the interface of Buddhism, biology,

and existentialism – and encourage readers to consider that very important issue for themselves. In what follows, I will discuss instead, and in turn, the three major themes in Barash's book: parallels between Buddhism and biology, engaging the world as a biologically minded Buddhist (or vice versa), and existential bio-Buddhism. These are the concepts that invite critical engagement and promise to make the book rewarding for readers friendly to Buddhism or familiar with biology.

The heart of the book, comprising well over half its length (chapters 1–4), is dedicated to the convergence of Buddhism and biology. However, from the standpoint of Buddhism, Barash does something remarkable. He does not consider any of the various Buddhist traditions, let alone its two basic schools in any detail (i.e., Theravada and Mahayana), but reduces Buddhism to its basic philosophical structure, eliminating anything metaphysical, sacred, and culturally relative about it (p. 9). In so doing, he claims to remove himself from any obeisance to "religious dogma or spiritual mumbo-jumbo," such as spiritual karma and reincarnation, and to adopt a practical version of Buddhism, which allows it to be evenly compared to biology (pp. 10–12). Without taking much notice of Buddhism as a religious system, then, Barash presumes that:

> Buddhism in its most useful, user-friendly, and indeed meaningful form is not in fact a religion in the standard Western sense of the term. Rather, it is a perspective, a philosophical tradition of inquiry and wisdom, a way of looking at the world. (p. 12)

This bold presumption is unjustifiable for some Buddhist scholars (viz., those who recognize the usefulness and meaningfulness of distinct forms of Buddhism in different cultures around the world). But it does allow Barash to do to Buddhism what Thomas Jefferson did to Christianity with his *Jefferson Bible*: to remove the supernatural from the religion, and to use the religion's teachings to humanize aspects of modernity. Along these lines, Barash claims that philosophical Buddhism is ideal for humanizing science, and thereby solving the many problems of modernity, such as environmental destruction (pp. 19–20).

Barash accomplishes this by showing that the empirical views of biology are congruent with the normative views of Buddhism. According to Barash, this not only shows that the two are natural bedfellows, but also that they have independently arrived at similar insights about the nature of reality (pp. 20–25). Specifically, with numerous examples from biology, Barash makes a convincing case that the three marks of existence in Buddhism, namely, "Not-self, impermanence, and interconnectedness [viz., as it relates to suffering,] are built into the very structure of the world, and all living things – including human beings" (p. 27). Because each of these receives its own chapter, it is worth briefly addressing them in turn.

- *Anatta* or "not-self" is the view that there is not a permanent, essential being associated with any one of us, or with any other organism for that matter, as in the sense of a stable identity, persona, or soul that survives across the lifespan (or exists before or after life). Rather, the "self" as we know it is a constructed ego, illusively sitting atop "dependent originations" –that is, the interdependent organizations of matter. This ancient idea, somewhat unique and vital to Buddhism, is being vindicated by evolutionary biology, which shows that all of existence – from ecosystems to trophic levels – are interdependent (p. 20). Further, biological ideas about the self, such as the "Astonishing Hypothesis" by Francis Crick, posit that personal identity is nothing more than the behavior of nerve cells and molecules, from which consciousness and our sense of personal identity emerge (p. 31).

- *Anicca* or "impermanence" is the Buddhist view that everything in existence is in a constant state of flux. This Heraclitian state of flux is embodied in all living things, as evidenced by the changes in organisms across their lifecycles and the fact that nothing in nature has a fixed (Platonic) essence (p. 83). Biology shows that this is indeed the case. From the internal mechanisms of organisms to the external niches provided by shifting environments, all of life is designed to survive in a state of flux held together for a short period of time by homeostasis and other dynamic systems, but eventually giving way to death and extinction (p. 60). However, Buddhism and biology alike show that it is through the eternal flux of nature that new cells, organisms, and species arise, engendering life itself (p. 64).
- *Pratitya-samutpada* is the Buddhist idea of "interconnectedness" or that all things in nature are interrelated (p. 88). This notion, it almost goes without saying, is central to evolutionary biology: from the fact that plants depend on birds to pollinate flowers to the DNA evidence that we share 98 percent of our genes with chimpanzees, everything in nature is in a state of what Buddhists call "interbeing" (pp. 86–91). However, it is from this insight that Buddhists infer their core ethic, which can extend into biology: the meaning of our human existence comes from being in relation and interaction with all other forms of life (p. 103). Consequentially, we have a responsibility to the life forms around us: to minimize their suffering, to reduce the suffering we cause, and to transcend our own suffering (p. 114). This touches upon the Buddha's most critical insight, namely *Dukkha*, which holds that all living things suffer or, perhaps more accurately, everything "experience[s] dis-ease," since nothing in nature is lasting (*anicca*). Still, because we have no permanent self (*anatta*) and all forms of life are interconnected (*pratitya-samutpada*), our very existence is bound to all other life forms, and thus we must cherish them (pp. 110–111). When life is seen from this perspective, the Buddhist and biologist agree with Darwin that "there is grandeur in this view of life" (p. 111).

This is only the tip of the iceberg, for Barash draws several additional parallels along these lines. In any case, by exploring these three themes, Barash not only shows how penetrating the Buddha's introspection was – and how biologically minded Buddhism can be – but also how Buddhism offers a normative philosophy that complements the empirical discoveries in biology.

From this normative and empirical marriage, Barash makes his case for humanizing the sciences and engaging modernity with a Buddhist and biologically minded viewpoint. On the one hand, much of what Barash says in this section of the book (chapters 5–6) is akin to literature on "engaged Buddhism." For instance, he argues that once we realize that human beings are not special in nature but rather dependent on every other aspect of the natural world, we should embrace the value of *ahimsa* or the ethic of doing little to no harm to other sentient beings (p. 113). Similarly, the best way to humanize our outlooks and engage the world is through the Buddhist "Middle Way," where dualisms or extremes of any sort are avoided (p. 115). On the other hand, what Barash offers in this section is a vantage point for engaged Buddhism that is particularly robust in light of his borrowings from biology. By way of example, Barash uses evolutionary biology to show that there is such a thing as "gene based karma," in which we inherit naturally selected ways of being in the world that may not always lead to our own well-being or the well-being of other organisms (p. 130), which thus demands our striving for what Buddhists call "mindfulness." Part of that mindfulness, from a biological standpoint, is to control our "instinctive tendencies toward

selfishness" and extend our "prosocial concerns" for kin and kith to other sentient beings, and thereby care for humanity and nature (pp. 139–155).

Having made his case for engagement, Barash moves to the final goal of his book, which is considering the "meaning of life" (p. 155). Although Barash frames this final section (chapter 7) as an articulation of his own ethical perspective, it is a logical continuation of previous chapters, and includes an artful and convincing ethical system that Barash calls "existential bio-Buddhism." This is the view that life has no inherent meaning and people do not have a deeper purpose beyond survival and reproduction, but our position in nature demands that we consider our responsibility for others and how our actions impact the natural world (p. 156). After all, natural selection and cultural systems such as Buddhism have endowed us with sufficiently complex thought to recognize the way the world really is and to act against our evolved natures to better that world (p. 172).

In sum, Barash's book offers insightful outlooks on an array of critical issues. It skillfully integrates biology with Buddhism and offers a thought-provoking perspective on what persons ought to value most highly given what we know about ourselves as natural beings. Hence, whether Buddhist or biologist, the views offered by Barash are sure to be enlightening.

Jordan Kiper
Anthropology Department, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA
jordan.kiper@uconn.edu

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