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Book review of 'Dialectical Practice in Tibetan Philosophical Culture: An Ethnomethodological Inquiry into Formal Reasoning' by Kenneth Liberman

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DIALECTICAL PRACTICE IN TIBETAN PHILOSOPHICAL CULTURE: AN ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO FORMAL REASONING

KENNETH LIBERMAN

REVIEWED BY D. PHILLIP STANLEY

In the foreward to the book, the initiator of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel, praises Liberman's application of his methodology to Tibetan monastic debate as an "exceptional ethnography" of "reason in its lived, embodied, choreographed exhibits of organizational Things in the details" that "makes it possible to ask perspicuous, sociological questions about the local organizational work of formal reasoning" (ix-x). Liberman describes his approach as "philosophical anthropology" (296), by which he means an "exhaustive microsociological account" (27) of the living philosophical practices of a community.

Liberman asserts that Indologists and Tibetologists have ignored "almost entirely the life-world of Tibetan scholars," due to their focus on the philological analysis of texts. They thus "remain incapable of comprehending, with anything like a basic sociological adequacy, South Asian or Tibetan philosophical practice as lived traditions" (3, italics in the original). He argues that the social practices involved in debate play a central role in the emergence of philosophical insights. He notes that "logic and reason are devices that assist the philosophers in their social task of organizing a philosophical inquiry.... It is only within a context constituted by the forms of social interaction...that one can begin to attempt to dissociate a propositional formulation from those activities.... That formal reasoning becomes transcendental is a social as well as a philosophical phenomenon" (85). He observes that "social amnesia" regarding the communal roots of philosophical

insight enables the objectification of insights such that they rise to transcendent truths applicable to all times and places (p. 104-105).

Regarding Tibetan debate, Liberman observes that the "employment of absurd consequences...lends to Tibetan philosophical discourse a certain flavor of irony, and Tibetan argumentation can become very humorous." He highlights the "playfulness with which Tibetan philosophers entertain ironies" (189). For instance, he describes a debate in which it has come to light that "there can be a person who accepts profound theses as true and so is a proper member of his school of philosophical tenets, yet fails to realize their true import" (191). He describes how "By this time the defenders are in full celebration of this irony and the insight into the philosopher's life that it bears, and so they sustain the patent absurdity... just wonderfully proposed" by the challenger (191). Liberman identifies the emergence of such insights as "the acme of Geluk philosophical practice" (191). He proposes that the goal of debate is not simply to formally expose a contradiction in the thinking of another but to "*bring it to life* in front of the thinkers" (181, italics in original). He states that "The pith of the Tibetan dialectical system is to be continually placing every philosophical system at risk" (58) and he praises the "real world creativity of thinkers working with, through, and 'beyond' the [logical] forms" (p. 263).

Such statements describe the debate practice at its best and may appear naïve out of context. Liberman notes that there are scholars who have severely

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Kenneth Liberman

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criticized the Tibetan debate tradition. For example, he cites one scholar's depiction of debate as the "slavish pursuit of formalistic argumentation according to the scripts set forth in the *yig cha* [the manuals of one's monastic college]" (266). While Liberman acknowledges the ever present potential for sterility and sophistry in debate, he takes issue with such characterizations as one-sided. He proposes instead a more balanced picture. For example, he stresses the role of rhetorical moves in debate, both in their positive use to accentuate substantial insights as well as in their negative "diabolical" (75) use for sheer sophistry to "win" a debate. These rhetorical moves include vague evasive responses by defendants, misrepresentations of a defendant's statements by the challenger, bluffing, ridicule, formal claims of contradiction when none have occurred, stalls and digressions, verbal harassment, derisive laughter, accusative vocal gestures ("Ahaaah!"), "antagonistic wrappings and twirlings of the challenger's rosary" (76), and so on.

Liberman shows considerable insight into the performative aspects of debate. He appreciates the aesthetics of the skillful enactment of the forms of debate, the pleasing union of elocution, bodily movements, and logical content. He highlights the elegance, rhythm, dignity, the synchronized choreography, verbal pirouettes, rhythmic overlaps, rhymes, and speaking-as-one of challengers and defenders as they work together. Such qualities come and go within specific debates. When they arise, they may be accompanied by significant content or not, but in either case they add to the appeal of debate. Liberman notes that "Tibetan debaters work deliberately to direct these energies into a well synchronized, smoothly flowing course of dialectics. When the dialectics is going well, the energies are flowing freely and there is a synergy that is brought to their intellectual concerns" (217). These qualities can be seen in the CD that accompanies the book and provides a visual and auditory record of all the debates that he analyzes.

Liberman acknowledges the dangers of setting forth the tremendous detail involved in applying ethnomethodology to debate. He writes:

In Garfinkel's terms, such local work consists of 'the holy hellish *concreteness* of things.'...[O]ne becomes swamped by the details...A serious risk is whether any audience will have the interest or the patience to learn such a level of detail. But there is no alternative but to try to make one's way through what Bar-Hillel calls 'the jungle of daily discourse.'" (37)

Much of the book proceeds by means of detailed analysis of small portions of various debates. Many readers will likely find a good portion of the debates intelligible, especially if they put effort into learning the rudiments of Tibetan debate set forth in the book. Tibetan debate tends to be laconic so that the meaning of a specific debate term at a specific point in a debate may still not be fully clear to a given reader. Fortunately, one can appreciate Liberman's numerous insights without going through all the debates. He has a distinctive way of translating the formal debate language into English. The result is somewhat awkward but this is at least in part due to the formal nature of debate language. Nonetheless, his usages are intelligible and consistent. (On a minor note, there are a number of typos in his transliterations of the Tibetan terminology: *gsel* should be *gsal* (68), *rte* should be of *ste* (88), etc.)

In summary, Liberman's critique of the neglect of the lived social practice of the Tibetan tradition by textually-oriented Tibetologists and Indologists is to the point, though he has not adequately dealt with how the textual tradition has served as a powerful, conservative, constraining influence on debate. He also provides a welcome corrective to one-sided critiques of debate. He reveals the creative, probing, insightful dimensions of debate as well as its aesthetic appeal. He also artfully communicates how this social practice of debate can be a personally compelling, even transformative endeavor for the monk-scholars involved, while also noting its potential for sophistic misuse or rote shallow engagement. The book thus presents a balanced analysis of the socially embedded practices of Tibetan debate.

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